

LAST WAVE

THE LAST BEST HOPE OF SPECULATIVE FICTION

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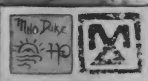
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IN PRAISE OF PESSIMISM:

Two Arguments In Defense of Depression

I

Too many writers these days seem to be paying slavish attention to their readers. "The customer is always right," these literary P.T. Barnums say, sacrificing valuable years of their writing careers to producing the sequels, prequels, and never-ending series that must be tithed to fandom in exchange for its supposedly nourishing respect. They point to their rows of glittering awards and to the bottom lines of their fat contracts as if these justified their actions. Many authors, having found what they consider to be a mother lode which is in actuality a field of entrapping lotus blossoms that will slowly curdle their talents, feel that they've gotten the best of the deal. They haven't. They have been tricked into believing in the godhood of the reader, and in their efforts to please the ideal reader who does not exist they ultimately please no one. In fact, the reader is not always right, and it is pointless to worry first about entertaining or making things easy for the reader. There is nothing wrong with doing so as a byproduct of the writer's inspired creation, but it should not be the primary objective of the storyteller. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. has written, "Every successful creative person creates with an audience of one in mind." The story should and must come first.

Here's why.

II

Critics have constantly complained of authors who present views of life they themselves do not agree with as being "dreary." Authors in this situation often find their novels called "vast pessimistic tracts." Their outlook on life is said to be "distorted." But an often unasked question is "To whom?" In the final analysis, these verdicts are extremely subjective.

Taking two books as examples, one that critics have dubbed "pessimistic" and "depressing," and one that they consider "uplifting" and "entertaining," it should be easy to see if any of these four words have intrinsic sense, and if a writer should pay the slightest bit of attention to the hullabaloo that surrounds their use. For the book that the vast majority of critics harp on as dark and upsetting and disturbing, I choose Tom Disch's *Camp Concentration*. And for its supposed literary and emotional opposite, I pick Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series.

(You'll find that this analysis can work as well with movies, television shows, and music. If you desire, you can juxtapose *Z* versus *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *Hill Street Blues* versus *Adam-12*, or "Blue Monday" versus "It's A Small World After All" instead as you continue to read; the specific genre doesn't particularly matter.)

There are readers of Tom Disch's *Camp Concentration* who find the work to be unrelentingly depressing. They cannot read of characters going through experiences and coping with them realistically without feeling their pain and despising the author for having made them experience it. They grow sullen when the characters in the books that they read do not behave heroically and in a manner larger than life. They demand that the protagonists in the novels that they read be better than they are. If the people portrayed behave worse, or if they respond to the events in the plot only just as well as the reader would, they grow dissatisfied and feel cheated. They do not want what they read to tell them anything of what they are. If a novel reminds them of the life they lead, they are disappointed. Art must not mirror life, it must anesthetize them from it.

But take yet another set of readers reading the same work. These readers, having seen the same characters running through the same squirrel cages, come away feeling somehow uplifted. These readers gain insight into their own problems by the actions of the characters, and come away from the novel better able to deal with the problems of their own lives. If the flawed characters overcome their problems, the readers are led to believe that they too, though

flawed, can overcome their real life problems. If the characters fail, the readers determine that they will strive to be better than the people they have read about. They will come away shouting "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore," or "God damn it, this isn't going to happen to me!"

Since each of these opposing feelings is subjective and the author has no way of knowing which response to his text will be engendered in which reader, the author should ignore the thought that a "depressing" book will only depress, and should let the *story* decide if it demands that it have certain elements, and not kowtow to the readers demanding either their presence or elimination.

Then we have Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series. Many readers come away from this massive work feeling uplifted. They are inspired by the heroic deeds of the characters in its pages and are determined to mold their own lives after their examples. They are ennobled by the actions enshrined therein. They feel that within its plot threads they have received evidence of the dignity of man and of the ability of the individual to triumph over overwhelming odds. They like to try to live up to a perfection that does not exist in the real world, and to try to measure up to standards that cannot be equaled. They are made exhilarated by the experience of entering a world where right always triumphs over wrong.

But then there are always readers who find such work depressing. "I could never be as good as these heroes," they moan, and feel wretched and flawed in comparison. Like the children who watched the idyllic television series "Father Knows Best" and grew depressed because they knew that there must be something wrong with their families because their Mom and Dad yelled at each other from time to time unlike the Andersons, the fraudulently excellent behavior of the Asimovian characters only serves to point out the readers' shortcomings. Instead of being driven to ape the good qualities of the heroes in these books, these particular readers either totally disbelieve the entire world created by the author because they have never met people so well-behaved and perfect in real life, or they grow depressed because they know they could never live up to their respected hero's exacting standards. They are made restless by accounts of things that are not and could never be.

Again, both of these responses, this time to a supposedly "entertaining" work, are different and subjective. If an author wants to uplift, it is not always to the point to write on the more obvious and agreed upon uplifting themes. Since a supposedly "depressing" book can either depress or uplift, and a supposedly "entertaining" book can either entertain or upset, an author should pay no attention at all

to what effect his or her works will have upon the reader as judged by these criteria. Some find Barry Longyear to be depressing, and others feel Norman Spinrad to be uplifting. And there are those who feel the opposite way about each author as well. So what should the writer attempt since it is impossible to know exactly what the reader will pull from the work?

III

Since the writer, as I have shown, cannot trust the reader, who can be trusted? In whose cause does the writer put words down on a page?

In his own cause. In her own special way.

Since it is foolish for an author to expect any two readers to come away from the same work with the same emotional story being told, the writer alone must be the ultimate audience.

Writing is a way of perceiving the world, and nothing more. If any outside force attempts to warp that perception for any other consideration, whether to curry favor with a supposedly more intelligent (or more pandering, or more purchasing, or more etc.) brand of reader or to squeeze a few extra dollars out of an editor, the work is undeniably hurt.

The writer must have only one God.

In her novel *Real People* (Random House, 1969), Alison Lurie has written, "If nothing will finally survive of life besides what artists report of it, we have no right to report what we know to be lies."

The true writer has but an audience of one. Anybody else who happens to share an individual writer's particular vision may be viewed as a bonus. □



— Scott Edelman

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FROM THE FISHBOWL

by David R. Bunch

He was just a fish like millions of fish safe-at-home in bowls all over America. He swam his tight circles; he ate his store-bought fish food; he fouled his glass bowl normally and had to be cleaned up. Then one day, watching him swim all his tight circles to Nowhere, closely hugging the sides of his bowl the way he always did so well, I thought of a novel way to relieve his monotony and perhaps, at the same time, explode him into history as the first and only fish to have such a high-tech thing befall him. And oh, SO sophisticated —

Along with my tedious preparation of the instrument for the execution of the novel experience that would employ the most advanced of tech, I worked long and hard and went to no little expense to set up a battery of three cameras to fully record this history-shaking event. I wanted a camera in front for a head-on shot, to certify what surely would be scientifically invaluable, and also I thought I required a camera on either side to record each eye and how it surprise-wandered or lock-froze or merely “swam” away at the precise instant of my finely planned moment in history. —

Yet I must convey to you, the means-to-document was, by comparison, the easy part; for that entailed really little more than a run-of-the-mill application of practical photomanship to set up the cameras and arrange to have them operated at the right hairline moment in historical time-flow — by a routine alignment of pulleys, gears and trip-levers activated by a small windmill set turning by some hot air. On a timer. The hot air would be furnished through a hole surreptitiously cut — and kept lidded until needed — in one of my twenty-two hot air distributor pipes on my splendid old-monster furnace in the basement of my ancestral home. (I always say be simple; save tech; never debase computer hardware or software on that you can do with a furnace pipe in your basement. —It’s just a mind-set credo, a heartfelt whim. YOU take it or leave it.)

Now the other! the execution of the act to be recorded, THERE was a thing monstrously hard to achieve, but once achieved must surely confirm my status as a science giant of great inner fire and stellar research promise (which I most confidently believe I am) and an outstanding technological innovator (which I most hotly aspire to be remembered as throughout the entire civilized world). —For my daring and fine plan, I required a bit of metal almost to the clarity of unpolluted air, or perhaps better, the no-color of clean, un-

compromised raindrops. It must be of a thinness, and yet a toughness, almost to defy reason, let alone description. It must be capable of taking an edge of such a rare and unusual refinement as to make the “sharpest blades ever honed” seem, by comparison, blunt as a toddler-toy rubber axe. (Without very much trouble I found this metal, I am happy to report to you, among the tough new alloys developed by our routine factory sciences.)

A generous portion of this near-magical produce, together with explicitly stated and richly illustrated-blueprinted specifications, I sent on to one of the great manufacturing concerns noted for their successes with “special projects” in our broad, brave and ever-onward land. (OH, forward in tech forever — YES — joyfully we DO on!) —I paid them generously, many thousands in happy dollars (for I am a rich, only-child inventor-heir [*gadgets for the home of homo sapiens*] let me say, as well as a sober young genius lavishly and variously educated in several universities across this sprawled country, and widely taught on abroad), and I knew they, the Moguls of Manufacture, would never question why I had procured a thin slice of their new alloy to the general no-hue of raindrops, and why now I must have this dull slab millions of times sharper than the sharpest edge ever honed. (No one in these great days of computer mushroom to glorious total takeover questions any magnificent employment of tech! or asks if its going to be good for us in the long pull to a betterment that really means. So to ask would certainly mark one as a dull dud, lacking in the “spark and spunkle that shines for modern times,” and better off dead! Oh pooh! on anyone who would try to.) To keep THEM from pondering too probingly upon the dullness and homey usualness of a little old fishbowl, which I included along with the general requirement for suction cups, I laid it right out there in their faces in tidy postscript form and told them plain: I am a budding tech genius who practices hard keen science in full agreement with my chronological age and my time-in-history place. HOORAY for genius Progress.

So I settled down to wait the long days through until my order should come home from the big factory all those many miles out there (where the cheap help was). To while the tedium, I wrote long Letters to Future Days, giving my solid-pungent, little-jewel views on almost every weighty moral subject of modern times. For I had no doubt at all



that my fish and I soon would accomplish things in tech that would make my social judgments seem of very great moral moment to future peoples and periods. Perhaps centuries on would see *this* name not dead! — In one unusually sober segment, I drew up a rather detailed set of contingencies and responses for our personal and national conduct-to-counter, should our wonderful nuclear power plants ever be nuked by a hostile sovereign government, or governments, bent upon a total, or even a partial, revision of our sacred core philosophies. (Pooh on those who would say run Run RUN and pray Pray PRAY. That's not tech. Tech WILL protect. Tech WILL find a way. HEY!) Then I went on record in a document to be placed in the time capsule (along with my *Letters to Future Days*) letting any follow-up world know in no quibbling manner that I endorsed tech, and no one would ever revise me on that point! Next, since I had just about written myself out on almost every important iffy subject for the time being, even unto trilogies on them (repeating myself three times, as any good science fiction writer soon learns to do — tee hee), and my order still had not come in from the big factory that I had to believe was doing its best for me (perhaps even now they had my request targeted well within their computer bomb sights!), I began to putt GO-GO golf balls on my den carpet, zonking brand-new orders into precision-made little holes I had carved into the home wall's southern wing just right for these state-of-the-art leisure pellets to take wallboard-hidden trips around my old house's dark avenues, down considerable lengths of ancient tin (no doubt quite webbed and sooted, from close to a century now) and at the end plunk, very like unto dirty giant hail balls, down into my basement's furnace area. — *putt-rundle-thunk putt-rundle-thunk putt-rundle-thunk* — hour upon fun-relaxing hour, while I waited for my order to come home. Come home and lay the groundwork for a novel, unique befallment for my historical (to be) fish! YES!

(These kinds of things make for days that are SO modern, I sometimes — nearly always — think, and I believe it.)

SO — it was just as I hit the millionth kill-time ball (an estimate! now!) that a tingling messaged through my central bowels (personal-radar guts!) telling me that it was the day. Waiting must end, must always somehow come to its term. Aren't a million putted GO-GO's (holed) enough standing aside for almost any standing aside, even unto human patience at the Dangerous Edge? Plus the trilogy opinions, let us not forget, that I had done like the good science fic—I broke for the window, and he moved into my vision as I searched for him in the throats of all the sidewalks that white Monday, the old gray post person on his daily way! But how slowly he moved through the pale inner lanes of snow to the red mansions! a strange fish, head-up, tail-down, just seeming to drift-bob the blue-jelly air as if in some quiet, persisting predicament, but still afloat! in a thick-water suspension. Was this that poor excuse then, that holdover from a time almost prehistoric, that was to

play cold midwife to my high hopes and the great factory tech? How dare an age so teched to be so far unteched in this important aspect! Should not my filled order be zinging in by street-level pressure carrier — from factory dock to personal receiving depot — notified sufficiently in advance by point-of-origin computer programming dropoff target time into my receptor basket's hungry ears?

Suppose this day was the irrevocable unstayable day for the Gaunt Taker to come for the thin postman's drab unshining life and unlock his soul-case for Death. Would I dare to go where he fell, heartfaltered and all undone in the tire-gashed snow just prior to my mail slot, and rummage through his old brown sack, whirl the letters and postcards out until I found my parcel? Would I dare? Tampering with the U.S. mails! Would I risk THAT? Even for tech? SO — why not whiz-cars bearing down on receptor baskets waiting, poised for these important consignments?

He passed on by that day without so much as a bird glance at my door! just moved on across my front windows like some vague ghost home to a rendezvous in the snow at a bent-roof house where he left a C.O.D. Under eaves of icicles like tusks of a giant Thing, I thought, he loafed there, exchanging small (probably) unnecessary (surely) ideas with an old bow-back female, while science opportunity, frustrated and foiled by non-delivery, fumed and sputtered at my place.

Next day or so, at loose ends and still hanging, but dogged-set and in the will determined not to fall back to putting (or writing either) I microwaved me an oven full of balls — for sweet eccentricity's sake and a reason, too (in case you think I was but being fey) — until they all were tea-roll GO-GO's (crisp and brown!) and he rang! Quickly and accurately, I bombardiered still waters with ten of the bakery balls (to Florida the fishbowl! in case you think I was but being mad, to give my historically-destined darling — poor, unsuspecting fish — a resort temperature for one brief warm-swim time — against all the dead-cold aeons he very soon must own, and thus show too that a scientist just might know sentiment). Then I ran down to the good gray old post person; and he left me a neat parcel exceedingly thin and tight from the wonderful factory so many miles boondocked (but smokestacked to challenge the clouds and the heavens) out where the cheap help was. As a kind of afterthought, it seemed to me, the gaunt courier with the look of death not long away in his eyes, or anyway retirement, plumbed the depths and searched far back to find for me in his very-old-leather postal pouch another and more ordinary box. This I supposed contained the attachments. Rid of strange cargo, he moved on out then without a word to friendly exchange and fought the streets on down as best he could in all the slipperiness of the powder snow, the coldness of the hour; and his age I'm sure was not helping. Standing there looking at what I held that he had lugged in for me on a bad day, against all inclemency, I could only be glad that he had lasted long enough to reach my address and fill my hands with what I needed for my fish, for tech and



for history. And now I must be about using these fine things.

In a kind of euphoric trance I ascended to my second-floor ten-room work place for tech and dreams. The fishbowl swam a pampered golden guest (I was aware) who seemed to find no end of ways to wiggle fins and lash tail to raise and lower himself among the random positioning of the warmer-balls I had chosen to bomb him with for a last swim-Florida. I watched him almost hypnotize me with that.

Dragging my mind loose from the swimmer, floating on plans I had and well-schooled in the immense drama of the unusual, I looked at old college memories until late in the afternoon, held reunions with some other recalled reminders of my young-and-almost-splendid life and was totally preoccupied (smug) until about nightfall. Then I began to climb staircases to fuller rooms of joy Joy JOY as I "turned on" floods of hope and piled the splendid memories over the marvelous mementos higher Higher HIGHER in a mighty mental celebration before stacking it all behind a partition marked for me in an alcove of special and dusty family heirlooms. (Yes, in the modern way, OF COURSE I had some drugs.) The Past was fine, but as beginning, and I had been a treasured campus darling across the schools I trod, with the family inventor money and "cookies" from home to side me, but NOW it is I who must truly DO. A man of DO I must BE, for the Past, for the Present, for the Future yet to thunder and a great Scientific Victory. YES! It was my Heritage, my Preparation and my Responsibility, splendid little crosses to bear, if you will. DO permit me: reap the fish, tech him NOW! my best hope it would seem of going early "to my meant star." My packages in hand from the doughty old post person had surely brought it down to just a matter of "going for it." For wide and wildfire fame. For an accomplishment to rock and rattle the entire civilized world. For a startlement almost too — Maybe a Nobel? Anyway THE Academy. Ah, Dreams— Ah, tech— Ah, Modern Times— (I was twenty-nine. I was running in the wind.)

(As I guess you are aware, IT doesn't have to mean anything, or make life any better, or help, or be any good. Many do; ALSO! some don't. [Like splitting the atom.] But IT *does* have to be immensely hard to bring off, complicated, and use a lot of tech. THEY have to be able to headline when they write about IT: "HE LEAPED HIGH FROM THE SHOULDERS OF SCIENCE GIANTS, CAME DOWN ON THEIR HEADS AND CATAPULTED FROM THERE TO TAKE A FARTHER GIANT'S PEEP." YES! Making existence any fuller, kinder, sweeter and enriching the Meanings — NOT strictly to the point — quite O.K. if it does and richly all right if it doesn't — so I honestly, fondly believed my fish and I had a chance.) YOU be the judge.

I stalked the bowl in the dark, grabbed the guest by his tail, took him thus from his day bowl, which was clear and had now had the microwaved balls, and placed him in his

night bowl, which was blue and had gray-green simulated sleep rocks — stones phonied to fool not fish but people looking into fishbowls. After which I started working on The Plan.

Throughout half the long winter night, working in splendidly-dedicated totally-involved completely-isolated concentration (just I against The Problem) I was without nature's sweet glances of moon or stars, or the inspiration of fresh frosty air (my shades were drawn, my windows were tight and storm-paned) — just the man-induced facts of my various work nooks, the Great Knowledge of tech times that were all about me permeating my every thought and pore, and a born tinkerer's gadget meditation-alcove fixed up very nearly like a shrine (OH YES!) richly equipped with a marvelously increasing number of today's wonders of do-it-yourself power tools, along with mighty examples of little home computers. Almost in a tranced state of the modern individual's tech-creation wish-and-do-it syndrome, I fixed at the thing almost the clear-seal of air, more the no-color of raindrops, millions of times sharper than the "sharpest blade ever honed" — with the suction cups fixed it to his bowl, out from the glass-curved wall precisely half the measured thickness (calipers!) of my small fish swimming his tight bowl-hugging circles. Then, fully sustained, incredibly fulfilled, I retired — SATISFIED! (WELL — of course! I had had me some drugs, in the modern way.) But I wasn't a fiend. And I hoped he might be sleeping well and dreaming sweet by the simulated gray-mossed-stones in his blue bowl for night hours, or drifting those slow rippleless circles (in which he hugged his bowl's walls so VERY well and rubbed them bright) in completest snugged safety in his half-sleep those final life times for him as fish. Tomorrow, and quite early, I must feed him his last "floater nuggets" of the "science-balanced" fish chow (guaranteed to be all a goldfish every would require to maintain him healthy in a prisoner bowl) and then put him to his history-triggered swim. For Destiny's great run.

In the lower bowels of my old ancestral dwelling place that next morning there was a splendid roaring as a raised lid on a central control pipe called for increased effort from my ancient, though magnificent and venerable old-monster furnace that, through my early boyhood tinkering, was fully capable now of handling the job of warming all my twenty-two bulging rooms of gadgetry. And just at that time in historically-sequenced consequence, and all by inevitable occurrence of course, and not meaning anything more than that, I am convinced (not that could, at any rate, in any way be proved) a chill rack of clouds centered over my place and spattered my roof and house sides with tiny pellets for a long hard time; a grainy blanket of splendid gray sleet soon lay upon the powder snow in my sprawled yard of several acres and gratingly whizzed, whispered and hissed there when the wind blew. And as if all this wasn't enough to make the morning fitting and fine, though different and weird, a jet plane squadron, right out of nowhere it seemed, entered the local air space to set up for a series of



tall practice dives that far exceeded the speed of ANY previous people's needs, certainly including cave men and surely YOUR parents and mine (but it seemed SO just right for NOW), burst wide the countryside, broke open the cold-ball sky and let fly with huge clatters of CLAP-BOOMS! that I'm certain some citizens read as doom-sounding while they tumbled from their couplings on rocky-pulse mattresses and from under electric spreads. (But I DID not!) Houses shuddered, windows shattered, bathtubs danced, and plumbing pipes buckled until they bled (some of them). Citizens provident, prepared with policies, RAN for these and searched the small print, even as they were trying to come to terms with the BOOM, the shudder, the shatter, and the sudden sleet that found their windows unseasonably open for entrance of nature's collant things. For some it was a time for sucking it up, and that was for certain! For me it was omen time that history must very soon explode, and all in my favor. THAT VERY DAY!

My small fish ran for the bend. He went into it near the wall, fins up and tail driving, nose arrowing true-course and body knifing water to speed lines as he strongly surface-swam; and he didn't even shudder when he hit where the thin thing was. He whizzed on by in a fast glide, fins frozen, no tail driving now, no movement now except forward, and at first I thought he, through a near-incredible last-split-second knifing down, had missed it. Genius eyes glued to the bowl, wild hopes starving and desperate, I started to dance in my frenzy, my frustration and my high sense of "probably-just-another-failure." Then something started to lag behind something! A fish and a half I saw, then one and three quarters fine fishes coming toward me! and at last two whole half-fishes head-on, not straining, perfect and thin in the bowl, in red-striped water. And so he fell apart as though edged light had passed through him on the fly; half way around again he just lay on his sides two times in what looked to be double perfection's twin-equal pieces. And that was the way my magnificent little goldfish surfaced the reddening waters, his exquisite and frail body as cleanly divided, as starkly postured, as dead! as a wax fish halved on a block. (He never even knew what hit him! — probably).

It was through; it was done. SUCCESS! Just what I wanted. Great day! He had but slim chance (clearly) even to feel what sliced him so fantastically to so quickly, quietly and scientifically make him not a fish alive. And all the intricacies, the nuances, the incredibly sophisticated overtones that were breakthrough were recorded for Science in the fine foresight of my planned photography activated by the furnace pipe I had harnessed to this occasion of my successful achievement of employing high tech to divide a little goldfish. YES! (And don't forget — in the arsenals of world powers now — stealth destruction is the REALLY IN!)

But wait! Oh dazzle! Sharp thinking! Keen! Genius forward! Progress reach-out! — It struck me with its overpowering rightness, like the sun showing up on long, wide

beaches of sparkle-light, calm, undimpled, cleanest, purest snow after a stalled period of sour gloom under clouds solid-pack. Why stop with half a sea of icebergs? Why quit when the world lies sprawled for a giant New Dawn unfolding in a fresh big Situation Day for further Progress. Take the whole bright pot of fame while the white flames roar and soar and the mind hot on glory's track with a perfect success rate of one! gulps its dazzle-glow and GROWS! FAME! — I do hope I am making myself clear.

What I really mean IS, I am getting ME another goldfish. And I am making ME a grid! this time, of that fabulous metal that has no more color than clean air and no more hue than rain dropped into that clean air, though the droplets spend a whole wet hour there whirled. And the grid THE GRID! above all, THE GRID!! — it must take the edge of the almost-impossible sharpness. Oh, dream me a mesh so thin in its parts, so multiple in its divisions, so invisible in its completeness that it will be (to any rational conceptual thinking — *think of it, Think of it, try! try! THINK of it!*) finally so solid-almost-nothing in its metal menace that it will be MUST BE sheer magic in its capability of myriad-multiple slicing (disappearance-dicing) any fish ANY THING! (that hits it) all gone in one flash-instant — POUFF! fish (thing) NO-MORE! YES, from the wonderful factory that has lit a flame this bright and hurled a torch this high must come help now for the thing tremendous; with factory produce rightly rectified I shall bring off an essence event that in its reality-gain must impact finally the Main Flow of all that we *think* we have known of this our world. In short, with my near-impossible wonder grid I shall dice a fish SO small, said fish won't be there at all — POUFF! GONE!! — PROGRESS!!? YES!!

While jet planes ripple the sky with their splendid coughs and clap thunder, while lean hard astronauts whirl to record upper wonders, while the bomb makers tinker and tally with all their vast expertise and successful past experiences brought to bear for a more potent product for us all, I'll make my strong bid too. THEN — let those who judge such things and assess arsenals try telling ME that I have not thrown some good strong weight into the scale balances. Let those who keenly know, and train to tell, evaluate fairly, honestly, and then say whether or not it is I who have begot something bold and new that only takes tech (further) development, tech (further) application, and SMART COMPUTERIZED harnessing-in to be fantastically capable of zapping quietly, efficiently, with no-remaining-strain erasure (in completest stealth execution), anything! Anything!! ANYTHING!!! in the whole entire wide waiting world, whether that thing glides through global waters, rides in Earth's envelope air, or slithers within the planet's crust of rock, soil, roots, rot and all that we have come to know as Home, our sacred basic ground. (State-of-the-art death?!?) HO! Frankly, I think so...

(In tech times, how Good it is to BE — MANALIVE!).



THE NINETEENTH CENTURY SPACESHIP

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by Richard Wilson

I asked my wife Tally how much of the story I should put down and she said all of it — most of the people are gone now, one way or another, and the statute of limitations should take care of everything else.

I'm Mitch MacSwan, manager of Radio Station WNOR here in the North Country of New York State. Tally is young enough that many a senior in this college town has mistaken her for a fellow student and asked her for a date. It still happens once in a while and she comes home glowing to tell me about it.

This is St. Lawrence County, which lies between the river of that name and the foothills of the Adirondacks. I came late to the county as a student at the University of the North but Tally was born here, the daughter of Judge Warren of the state supreme court. I was doing graduate work in broadcast journalism and if I wasn't the first student to ask Tally for a date I was the first to propose to her and the one she accepted.

That's enough background for now. No, wait; I should say I'm talking this into a cassette tape recorder in the privacy of my office — soundproofed for the making of commercials and promo messages — at WNOR. I'll keep the cassettes locked in the safe for the time being. Tony Warren, the judge, Tally's father, who is also my boss and the owner of the station, can listen to them when they're finished. It's always good to have expert legal advice, especially when it's free.

There. A British colleague of mine used to say "Always give them the circs," meaning the circumstances such as time, place and who's talking. I've put them in, so let's get on with the story.

A bus unloaded Pirt at the depot near the river in Potsdam. The bus was late and it was well past sunset.

He wasn't the only dark-skinned child in the group but he was — it's hard to describe — the *blackest*-looking. I don't mean color, because that was more gray-blue than black, at least in the fluorescent light of the bus depot. I guess you could say he was the most primitive-looking of the bunch. I thought he looked like an Australian bushman, an aborigine.

They'd asked Tally and me if we had any negative feelings about a dark child and we said no, of course not. We didn't tell them Tally has Seminole blood in her and is named for her maternal grandmother's home town,

Tallahassee.

A man from the Summer Residents organization was with the kids and we got his attention. He was sweating from the strain of matching his young charges, who ranged from about eight to 12, with their sponsors.

To make identification easier I was wearing a name tag from a seminar I'd attended at U North. The man said: "MacSwan, right. You've got Pirt and one valise tied with rope because the hinge busted. Sign right here for them. Say hello to Mr. and Mrs. MacSwan, Pirt, and have a wonderful summer here in the beautiful St. Lawrence Valley." He sounded like one of our radio promos.

Pirt and I shook hands. He had a strong grip. Tally bent down and gave him a hug, which left him impassive. I couldn't blame him, getting shunted from stranger to stranger far from home and signed for like luggage.

He was about three feet tall and the Summer Residents man told us he was small for his age, which turned out to be a big understatement.

The papers that came with the boy said he was eleven and that his name was Pirt Avila, son of Marcia Avila and Father Unknown, from Inner City, U.S.A., land of the huddled poor. I'm changing names and disguising things, of course. I've also rearranged some of the geography and geology. But by and large things happened the way you'll hear.

We looked forward to a summer of seeing Pirt grow some in our clean country air and teaching him a few things in a painless offhand way. Like improving his accent, maybe. We imagined he'd speak with a typical big city slum accent but as yet he hadn't favored us with many remarks.

We took him up the long slope out of the village toward our year-round house on Higley Flow. There aren't too many places that have flows instead of lakes. The only other one I can think of is Scapa Flow in the Orkneys. Our flow used to be a cranberry bog. Now it's a lake the power company created when it backed up the Raquette River behind the hydro dam at Colton. Our house is an overgrown camp on the water south of there. *Camp* is what we north country people call a vacation cottage — it could be anything from a crude shack to a palatial spread. Ours is a six-room house.

Friends used to kid Tally and me about how quiet it was at Higley, during the week anyway when the waterskiers



were otherwise occupied. A literary friend made up this rhyme for us:

"How are things at Higley Flow?
...Slow...slow..."

To get there you go south out of town and on a long rising road you pass an old wooden water tower. I call it the nineteenth century spaceship because it looks like a Fourth of July rocket standing on end, or one of those props from an old George Melies film.

Going the other way on a clear morning, heading toward town and the radio station, it's glorious to have it all laid out before you, thousands of acres stretching into another country. It sets your imagination going and that's one reason I love this land so much.

This is the country where rivers flow north to the St. Lawrence which itself flows north and east into the Atlantic and where you can't dig very far without encountering sand. The whole country was once a vast prehistoric sea. Parts of it make me think of the dead sea bottoms of John Carter's Barsoom and of adventures astride six-legged beasts galloping off to rescue Martian princesses.

Of course I know that any ancient civilizations here have evolved into traffic jams amid stretches of discount stores and fast food places and that the nineteenth century spaceship is just a water tower abandoned by the power company. But there's something prideful in being nearly as far north as you can get in this country. That tends to set us apart. Our borders are prodigious — the broad St. Lawrence to the west and north, the vastness of Canada beyond, the high wilderness of the Adirondacks to the southeast and an awful lot of the rest of the country to the south.

Within these mighty boundaries are things peculiarly our own: Joe Indian Pond. North Arabia. The Phantom Snowmobile Rider. Evidences of the ice age. Sunday Rock.

Going south on Route 56 you turn off at Colton for our place at Higley Flow but if you stay on the highway you head up into the Adirondacks, the Great North Woods. The north woods are south of us and south is up from here because the road climbs through our foothills past Sunday Rock, which used to mark the end of civilization and the beginning of wilderness. A special breed of loggers worked the forest in the old days and lived their own undisciplined life, especially on their day off, and there used to be a saying, "There's no law south of Sunday Rock."

Sometimes we're conscious of not being big time, but our pride lies in sharing the enduring qualities of the land. We survive the long, fierce winters. We know who we are and who we've been. We're the simple people who are worth a hill of beans because beans are eternal and we'll be here when some people are not because they've messed it up and we've held on.

Once in a while, of course, we're put down by the Canadians who point out that to them we're not north at all, but

south.

Pirt didn't open up to us easily. He didn't talk much about himself and his background. Asked about his mother once he said "A mother's a mother," and about the place he came from he said "A ghetto's a ghetto."

We found we didn't have to teach him good English; I don't know where he got his learning but he spoke a lot better than I do sometimes. It was hard to get used to — this little squirt of a kid, barely bigger than a two-year-old, with a tiny monkey face, talking in a childish lisp but in complete sentences, with a vocabulary bigger than that of some of the college kids who work at the radio station, and a sophistication that was more than big-city street-wise.

Tally said she didn't know whether to cuddle him or treat him like the more than half-way grownup he obviously was, entitled to a certain amount of freedom and unsupervised time.

Before he began wandering around by himself I took him to South Colton, to show him how steeply the Raquette River descends from the mountains on its way past Higley Flow to the ocean. I'd forgotten that upriver from the dam the river disappears for a while.

Pirt felt sorry for the river when I showed him where it had been taken from its bed and squeezed into big pipes. He was sad even after he saw it spume forth at the lower side of the hydro plant.

"You see, there it is again, Pirt," I said.

"No," he cried. "That's just water. It isn't a river now."

He made me feel that the Raquette had been degraded. I decided not to tell him how many times the river suffered this indignity between its source in the Adirondacks and its outlet in the St. Lawrence. Seven, I think.

Pirt stood out in town and country, as he wandered more or less at will, by the combination of his lowbrow head and highbrow conversation. Come to think of it, and I'm kind of ashamed of myself for the part I had in this, Pirt's conversation wasn't always that highbrow.

It was to be expected that as he got to be seen, in town and out, people became curious about him and it wasn't long before a reporter approached me. The occasion was a party at our place and for some reason a bunch of the men had drunk more than we usually do. Maybe because it was a hot night. At any rate it was getting late and some of us were on the screened porch listening to Roy Dalton tell bawdy stories. Pirt was in a dark corner, taking it in. He hadn't been drinking, as far as I know, but he might have sneaked a couple. I heard him snicker once or twice but not loud enough to cause Roy to moderate his language.

Melodie Murchison, the arts editor of the Northland News, poked her head around the corner and caught one of the punchlines. "I guess this is where the action is," she said. Melodie writes a selfconsciously cultural column called Northern Notables.

She got nothing but foot-shuffling silence as she looked



around, noticing Pirt in the process. "So you let him hang out with the big boys, Mac?" she said to me. "Isn't that refreshing. I'd like to do a piece on him."

"Why don't you ask him?" I sort of muttered.

Melodie went on talking over Pirt's head, which wasn't hard to do if you meant only literally. She said: "I see him as a sort of Art Linkletter kid. You know? Out of the mouths of babes kind of thing?"

Pirt piped up then. He said he was going to peepee on the peonies to save wear and tear on the septic tank. Whoever wanted to join him was welcome. He said he guessed his invitation applied only to our male guests, for anatomical reasons. He mentioned something about the glint of the full moon on intersecting streams. Surprisingly, to me, a quorum of our male guests expressed interest. Maybe they just wanted to get away from Melodie but one said he didn't see why the lady shouldn't join us in what was essentially a botanical experiment.

Melodie, who had been listening with what she must have imagined to be amused tolerance, put on her driving glasses, which made her look schoolteacherish and disapproving. She said she had second thoughts about the interview — maybe she should do a piece on parents in general and their influence on young and impressionable Summer Residents like Pirt. She said I could leave a message for her at the city desk any time. I guess she meant if I wanted to apologize. She drove off.

We tried to look ashamed of ourselves but as the sound of Melodie's Toyota died away we broke into snickers and went with Pirt to pee on the peonies. It had clouded up so there was no glint of moonlight on intersecting streams. Somebody's aim was bad and I got a wet sock.

Tally heard about it before the party ended and was angry because one of her guests had been insulted. Then she laughed. But she said to me later: "You wash your own socks for a while."

Pirt wasn't usually mean to the ladies. Nor was I. There's a young-minded lady of 79 who telephones me every week or so to comment on what she's heard on WNOR. Her name is Miss Loretta LaJoie, pronounced, please, La-zhwa, and she's a fiend for dates and other facts.

Each June Loretta calls on the Friday before Father's Day to remind me that the observance was begun in 1912 by Mrs. Maude Ellison of nearby Winthrop — though there's some dispute about that in other sections of the country.

Late in November she tells me it would be in bad taste for WNOR's announcers to say Xmas instead of Christmas. "Let's keep Christ in Christmas if for no other reason than a philological one," she said once. "I'm a Freethinker myself, but one should adhere to certain norms."

"Now what's this about Pirt being a hairy throwback? Is that just people gossiping, saying Pirt's a caveman? There's talk by the checkout lady at the supermarket, by the drug store man, about what Pirt buys, what he eats." Loretta

LaJoie went on a bit longer. I told her I'd heard no gossip but that Pirt's eating habits were like any active young boy's — voracious.

"Another thing," Loretta said. "I want to know more about those people who call themselves the Awaiters. Is Bernie O'Neill going to tell us? I wish you had Bernie on all the time instead of that dimwit who thinks news is pronounced nooze and noon nyoon. If I hear him say 'Here is the nooze at nyoon' one more time I think I shall expire — but not, I assure you, before I turn my dial to the Ogdensburg station."

I explained to her that Bernie couldn't be on the air all the time because he's an investigative reporter and the other is a studio announcer and d.j., not really a newsman.

She rang off then to listen to the noon news. Ours, I hoped.

Tally says that when she listens to these cassette tapes I do on Pirt they start out straightforward and factual and then begin to sound like a storyteller's tale. She finds herself listening to hear what will happen next even though she's lived through it all.

I've been a wire service reporter and a radio newscaster so I know how to put down facts but I'd forgotten that for a while in the midwest I narrated a radio show called *Tales from the Chimney Corner*. So if I get a little dramatic now and then you'll have to forgive me — whoever *you* are other than Tally; I don't consider the tapes to be of broadcast quality, and I don't mean just technically. This is a story we'd best keep in the family.

But I'd better back up a little and tell about Busky Kimp and the Awaiters.

Busky Kimp was a local ne'er-do-well, often in trouble with the law, landlords and loan companies. Banks had long since stopped doing business with him.

During the height of the snowmobile craze he'd owned six of the machines, bought one after another on the installment plan as their predecessors broke down. Now they'd all been repossessed and he was behind with the mortgage payments on his house.

Busky had worked at many trades, including money-digger. In that line of work he followed an old York State calling, tramping the county looking for treasure. His brother-in-law, a sometime printer, and a nephew were members of Busky's team. When they found a likely place they'd seek out people to finance their dig. Sometimes they located the backers first, then worked up a treasure site.

Along with the site they showed their investors maps and other papers that documented the presence of money, jewels or rare minerals. The papers were usually quite old, or appeared to be. I don't say they were forged but I repeat, Busky's wife's brother had worked in a print shop and still had access to it and to its many varieties of paper.

The license plate on Busky Kimp's aging car was 497-BIW, which he told people meant Back in the Woods.



It really stood for Bigelow, a township, and he was no hick; far from it.

I knew Busky from years back and once he had come to me at the radio station with a proposition. This was that WNOR help finance an expedition to locate buried treasure. The Lost Cache of the French Pretender, I think he called it.

Busky was vague about details and gave me only glimpses of documents and maps. But he told me that in addition to being allowed to invest, the station could have exclusive broadcast rights.

Actually there had been a French nobleman in the North Country, a refugee from the Terror. He and his followers had bought a huge tract of land south of us and planned a colony, or at least an enterprise, called Castorland. Castor is French for beaver and the idea was to raise the animals in vast numbers for their pelts. The beaver would be the basis of their economy.

The scheme never got off the ground but obviously a lot of money was involved. And here was Busky Kimp telling me he had a good idea where the French treasure had lain hidden for nearly two centuries.

As a money-digger, the descendant of a long line of treasure seekers, some honest, Busky didn't use the old-fashioned paraphernalia — hazel rod, Ouija board, globe of divination. He was right up to date with the scientific marvel of the age, a digging tool par excellence that sliced through our sandy soil like magic. So secret was the device that he couldn't show it to me until I had invested.

For a few minutes I was tempted. Visions of royal jewels and golden coins twinkled in my head. Why not put in with him? The amount he asked was relatively modest — a few thousand. It would not be unheard of for a communications company to help sponsor an expedition in exchange for broadcast or publications rights; I remembered the New York Times and the Loch Ness monster.

Then I came back to reality and turned him down. I couldn't let Kimp use WNOR's name as he went around soliciting other funds. I told him we'd gladly give him news coverage if and when his treasure hunt turned up something tangible.

I didn't know then that Busky Kimp had joined the Awaiters, the sect that talked to other-worldly spacemen, who promised to save them, and only them, when the Earth was destroyed. The Awaiters had a name for their spacemen-saviors. They called them the Benign Visitors.

At first the Awaiters were a purely local sect. I assigned Bernie O'Neill to the story and from him I began to get reports of people coming into the county in small groups from all over. Many were families. They pitched tents in the sandy semiwilderness I call North Arabia or set up Hoovervilles in the sparse woods near the dump or moved in with people already living in the poorer sections of town along the river.

But the newcomers were not all poor. Many came in late-

model cars or pickup trucks. Most of them were well-dressed and all were clean. Only their housing was makeshift, temporary.

Bernie recalled others who had come to the county in the recent past — hard-working young people who'd heard that we had some of the last cheap and wide-open real estate in the country, and the Amish who brought their skills and dedication to our short growing season to revitalize what others had abandoned as farmed-out land. But these newcomers were not like that. They slipped in unobtrusively and, for the most part, kept out of sight. "It's as if they're here on a stopover to someplace else," Bernie told me. "All kinds of rumors are going around. I get the feeling they're making a pilgrimage and we're a way station. Reminds me of the Underground Railway or the Exodus, with people fleeing bondage or persecution, except—"

"Except what?"

"Well, I'm no anthropologist but all these people, at least those I've seen, appear to be..." He trailed off.

"Come on," I said. "You're not on the air. You can talk plainer than that."

"So far I've seen only white, Anglo — Hell, Mac, it just seems that there isn't a black or a Jew among them."

"Okay, Bernie, thanks. And no Orientals or Arabs?"

"No." He laughed. "No Eskimos or Hispanics either, as long as we're getting ethnic."

"We're getting the facts, that's all."

In days and weeks to come Bernie kept an unobtrusive eye on the incomers, on WNOR's time and his own. He also dug into the background of Busky Kimp, who was a frequent visitor at the shantytowns and tent cities proliferating in the odd corners of our land. Kimp's money-digging had taken a back seat.

Bernie and his tape recorder were interviewing Busky Kimp.

"What's this about the Awaiters taking off on a comet?" Bernie asked. "'Off on a Comet' — that's a Jules Verne title."

"Some of us had folks who remembered when the comical star came and went," Busky said. "Before the first war."

"Comical star?"

"They called it that. A comet is what it was. Nobody got aboard then."

"You mean 1910? Halley's Comet?"

"That was the comical star, I guess. But we got a different one coming for us. Shozo-Ryder."

"Thank you, Lord," said a voice in the background.

"Interpretate to us, Busky lamb," another member of the flock said. "Tell it like we like to hear."

"Last year in the Orient a Japanese astronomer named Shozo found a new comet," Busky said. "About the same time in the Occident an Englishman named Ryder, another amateur, discovered it was coming this way. They called it Shozo-Ryder."



"Praise the Lord," the background voice said. "We gonna ride the Ryder."

"You can't live on a comet," Bernie said. "It's too small, for one thing."

"Don't you think I know that?" Busky said. "The comet's our transportation, not our destination. But it's big enough to take the bunch of us, and then some, to a planet called Panacea."

"Panacea?"

"A land that's largely ocean and tropical in climate," Busky said in a kind of sing-song. "It's a union of island countries clustered close, happy in their harmony. Their people invited us there, in their charity and compassion."

"And that's why you call it Panacea?" Bernie asked. "Because 'pan' means all together and 'ocean' is another word for 'sea'?"

"You could say that," Busky told him. He sounded smugger than usual. "You could also say it's because two of our people from Florida wanted to name it, and it's a nice name. They're from Panacea, south of Tallahassee."

"Oh," Bernie said. Tally could have told him that.

Rubbing it in, Busky informed him: "Panacea means a cure for all ills. Webster."

Doggedly, Bernie pressed on: "And how do you plan to get to this paradise?"

"Shozo-Ryder's gonna accelerate itself past Jupiter and go on to Panacea. It's all part of the Ironstone Theory. The Panaceans are great navigators, you know."

"I know what you tell me, Mr. Kimp. What will you live on during your flight? Have you got enough supplies?"

One of the Awaiters said: "Tell him about the soup."

"Soup?"

"Primordial soup," Busky said. "The stuff that nurtured our early ancestors."

"So you're going first class with the Panaceans flying your comet and feeding you too," Bernie said.

"It's the way to go. They know how to ladle it out. And there's plenty. Maybe it's what the ravens fed Elijah. It's the stuff the old astronomers thought replenishes the sun. Did you forget your science, Bernie? It travels with the comets. And like some French wine, it travels well."

Busky was full of zingers today.

((Hello. Let me introduce myself. No, I am not Mitchell MacSwan. I am Omniscient Observer, or O.O., and you will hear from me again, inside these distinctive double parentheses, in the course of this chronicle. I am here to observe your particular activities on this particular segment of Earth at this particular time, whatever time is. Remind me to tell you the story of Time and the Pig. Unlimited by time or space I range the Ages, sopping up your peculiar ways, giving you the once-over, the double-o, as befits an Omniscient One.

((My mission also is to set the record straight where it

touches what some of you call the Benign Vistors, your optimistic euphemism for They Who May Not Be Named, to paraphrase H. Rider Haggard. You may ask what I am doing here in the primitive memory vaults of Mitchell MacSwan, chronicler of unlikely events. I reply that his way of looking at things — may I call it MacSwan's Way? — is parochially his, and by extension yours. I do not think of us as policing you, however. We are more akin to passive watchers, but because we are not watching but listening to MacSwan's tapes, perhaps aural passive is a more descriptive term. Still, it is my duty to correct mistaken impressions, explain our point of view, defend our motives. Thus we are more observers than regulators, although we might do a bit of a fixup here and there for the convenience of listeners to come.

((A colleague sees my task as presiding over the cradle of Terrestrial civilization, endlessly mocking, for you are an infant race and I am old and wise. But my colleague is unfair. I am no cynic, although I often am forced to take you less seriously than you take yourselves. Enough now. I will speak here again as may be necessary.))

To the imaginative, even the name of our county conjures up visions of the desert. St. Lawrence; Lawrence of Arabia; North Arabia. In its own way it stretches unbounded, back through an infinity of time to another era of humankind to whom it was not a desert but an inland sea on whose edges they lived and left their mark.

I said to Pirt: "What about the great warm sea?"

"What about it?" he said warily.

"Did you ever sit beside it and think future thoughts?"

"Who, me?"

"And think that one day you'd return to it, thousands of years later?"

"No."

"Are you sure? Someone says you did and she'd like to bake you an apple pie."

"For an apple pie I'd lie," Pirt said. "With cinnamon?"

"I'm sure. And a big glass of milk."

"For that I'd be anything she wanted me to be," he said. "Maybe I did what she said. I haven't synched in yet, entirely. Maybe an inhibiting factor clouds my communication with you because you're so old."

"If you sat on the shore of the great warm sea, as Miss Loretta said, you're my elder by far. Are you my ancestor?"

"I guess I'm synching in, gradually. I seem to remember a sandy shore. A sea with no horizon. A warm sun that stayed overhead a long time. I was thinking thoughts too big for me. Thinking I'd come back later but not realizing I'd be no bigger or wiser."

"But you are. Not bigger but wiser. Wiser than me, if not Miss Loretta."

"I'd like to eat her apple pie but I've got bigger things to do."

"Like what?"

"I've got to communicate. I'm not the only one who sat on that ancient shore, you know. There were hundreds of us then."

"How many of you are there now?"

"Just me here. But I can't stay. There's something I must do."

He looked so lonely that my instinct was to grab him up in a hug but he wandered off into the night, his forehead wrinkled in thought.

He'd talked like this before and I'd always listened seriously to what I took to be childish fantasies. I assumed the make-believe compensated for the fact that he'd been shortchanged in stature and looks. Probably, avoided by kids his own age, he'd had plenty of time to peer into mirrors and reflect on who he was.

I had lots to think about, especially after the call from Loretta LaJoie. Was she fantasizing too? Or was she vox populi, reflecting what others in the village were saying?

Tally said at breakfast: "I woke up and found you gone. Then I looked in on Pirt and he was gone. I was worried and couldn't sleep for a long time. Finally I thought that you and he must be together. Then I slept. Were you?"

"Yes," I said, and no more.

"Good. Eat your breakfast."

"Is Pirt home?"

"Yes. He's sleeping. Eat."

"He's funny, you know," Tally said. "He's not the boy he seems."

"Oh?" I said, buttering toast.

"Not your average child. He's strange."

Did she know more than I did? "Strange how?"

"More intelligent than you'd expect him to be. Haven't you noticed?"

I added marmalade to the toast. "He's a city kid. They mature quicker down there." I ate slowly. Tally was having only tea.

"I wonder about him," she said.

An amphibian serenade told of the annual carnival, circus and field day of the volunteer fire department. It's a late summer event, advertised and promoted for weeks in advance in the pages of the Northland News and on the air of WNOR-AM-FM.

The firemen's launch, war-surplus Duck with a Dixieland band aboard, plied the waters of Higley Flow at dusk each night for a week. You'd hear it first from afar. Muskrat Ramble, Bill Bailey, Sage Hen Strut.

Then you'd see it, outlined by its strings of colored lights, gliding at low throttle along the darkening shore. Between the jazz numbers one of the firemen would man the loud hailer — a bottle was passed during the break — to invite the cottagers to spend a dollar admission for adults, half price for kids, babes-in-arms free. Come one, come all; join the fun. Then the jazz again, more ragged but more expressive. I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate, Beale Street, The SaintS...

It was a great day when the convoy of trucks of the Great Northern, Dominion and International Combined Shows Carnival rolled in.

The gaudy semis with their trailer cages stopped at the three-way intersection north of Higley Road and let out the tamer animals and the colorfully-dressed performers. First came the elephants (two) with their mahouts. Clowns capered around them.

Then came the Ringmaster, elegant, top-hatted, snapping his long whip.

Then the trick car that reared like a skittish horse and backfired twenty times to the minute.

Then the plumed steeds with bareback riders on their rumps; skilled, smiling horsewomen.

Then more clowns, tricking each other, joking with kids along the way.

Then the cages of lions (three) and tigers (two), pulled by zebras (four).

Then the Tiny Princess and the Tall Man, walking side by side, she a perfectly proportioned three-footer and he well over seven feet tall, with a conical hat that soared him to eight.

Pirt watched at the corner of Big Rock Road. I watched him from my place among a small working group — photographers, reporters, deputy sheriffs and field day committee people. Pirt was a detached observer until he saw the Tiny Princess. Something about her seemed to reach his heart. He saw her before she saw him. Her height was a little less than his. She looked more mature than he and I imagined him wishing he weren't dressed like the kids his size, that he might present an appearance to stop her glance.

She did look at him and it was more than a glance. She held his eyes and smiled and turned her head to keep him in view as the parade went by. He ran at the side of the road till he caught up with the clowns and waited for her to come by again.

She must have been pleased. She gave him a little wave. The way she moved her mouth (was she telling him something? Blowing him a kiss?) told him she knew he was more than a kid.

The Tall Man beckoned to him. "Come on, kid, join the parade."

The Tiny Princess smiled and Pirt got in step with them, the Tall Man between him and the little woman. She said: "Hi, Pal. Two of us almost make one of him."

The Tall Man said: "Hup, two, three, four. Smile for the people. Hot, ain't it, kid? What I'd give for a cold beer."

The Tall Man smiled at the people and the Tiny Princess bent forward around him to smile at Pirt as they paraded toward the fairgrounds.

She talked to him four feet below the Tall Man's ears. She said: "You look older than you look. Are you a midget?"

He didn't know how to reply but had to say something, not to lose her. "I'm a lot older than I look. Where can I see you later?"



The Tall Man smiled and called to the people. The Tiny Princess said to Pirt: "Back of the fortune teller — that's the tent with the hands on it. I'm behind it, in the camper."

"I'll find you," Pert said. "When?"

"Before the show and after. Before the show I'll take you around. After the show you take me to town or wherever."

Pirt said he knew a place. Then the Tall Man tapped him on the head and said: "Smile for the people, kid. It's part of the show. Smile. You too, Tina." It was the first time he'd heard her name.

Before the show he made his way through the trailers and semis and cages and tents to the palmist's place and thus to Tina's. "So long, kid," the Tall Man had said. "Thanks for swelling out the procession. Pardon me while I get a cold beer."

They had a slide-in camper on a Chevy pickup festooned with paint and decals proclaiming that the world's tiniest beauty dwelt therein. The poster paintings, circus-style, he thought as he knocked on her door, failed to do her justice.

She opened to him, smiling. "Come in. I made tea."

They barely had time for tea, much less to talk, before her call came but later, when he'd led her to Big Rock on the shore of the flow above the dam, they had time to say the things they wanted to say. They were honest. How else to be, with time so short? She said she was attracted to him but was married to the Tall Man. Incredibly the marriage worked. Maybe it was the magic of the circus world, the ambience of unlikes who were less unlike than those outside. Therefore she would go on with the show and her husband but tonight was a thing apart. She had her things apart and the Tall Man had his. Maybe tonight the Tall Man's thing was a dozen beers at the tavern down the road, or maybe he was having himself a time with the fortune teller, a gypsy from Jersey. Nevertheless an understanding existed, otherwise she couldn't be with Pirt at Big Rock, could she? So everything was all right, now, wasn't it? It wasn't often she met a real man her size. And she lay back on the flat upper part of the rock, dislodging an empty can that clattered down into the water.

I don't know what happened there on Big Rock. Neither did my informant, who'd heard about the other things from his wife, who'd had it from a woman friend, a retired carry worker in the village who knew Tina from way back.

I didn't want to hear any more than Pirt himself chose to tell me. He knew I'd seen him join the parade and call on Tina after the show.

"We went down to the water," Pirt said. "We sat and talked. I got lost for a while but I found my way home."

The owner of the pharmacy on Market Street called me over when I stopped to buy a paper. "Pirt said he'd be in to pay but it's been more than a month now," the pharmacist said. "I don't want to complain — he's a good boy — but can I put them on your bill just to keep the accounts straight?"

"Sure," I said. "Do that, of course." To myself I said "Oh, Lord..." Naturally I wondered what the items were. Condoms? Birth control pills? Vaginal foam?

So I said to the pharmacist, laughing ha-ha on the outside: "What were they? Chewing gum? Comic books? Not — ha-ha, one of *those* magazines?"

"No," he said. "Nothing literary. He bought four kinds of depilatories."

"Depilatories?"

"Hair removers. He wanted the best kind for the face."

I thought. He couldn't have bought them for Tally, whose facial hair was downy soft and ~~invisible~~ ^{invisible} except in bright sunlight.

I said to the druggist: "For Cousin Harriet, probably. Over in Parishville? She gave him a kiss once and he said it was scratchy. Her birthday's coming. You know how kids are about presents. They fasten on to one thing and don't think about hurt feelings."

"Well, if he'd asked me I'd have suggested a box of candy," the druggist said. "But Pirt's not much of an asker."

I didn't know what to think. A wild vision came to me of caveman hair sprouting all over Pirt's face and him not trusting himself to use my razor.

Then I thought: Maybe Pirt picked the wrong woman at the circus. Maybe the Bearded Lady would have been more his style. It was an unworthy thought and I banished it. But there lingered in my mind the possibility that Pirt could be comfortable among the people of circuses and carnivals. These people were accepted where outward differences were the norm and identified themselves as members of a special fraternity. For the short time he'd visited among them Pirt had become one of the group, the clan. He might have been happier if he'd stayed with them. The home they could share with a lonesome caveman was more compatible, perhaps, than anything Tally and I could offer. Yet Pirt had rejected them to return to us.

I tiptoed into the house because Tally was on the fainting couch. We'd seen the piece at a flea market and she had to have it once the dealer explained. It was a sofa, raised at one end, that Victorian ladies reclined on when they had a touch of the megrims. I wouldn't have bought it myself but Tally insisted.

Tally wasn't the kind to give in to her migraine headaches and retire to the bedroom, not unless they were really bad. Now most of the time what she did was draw the blinds and lie down for a while on the fainting couch. This showed that she wasn't taking the attack too seriously and that I didn't have to tiptoe around as if she were an invalid. I did anyway, of course.

She sat up when I came in.

"Sorry," I said.

"It's okay. I feel better now."

I'd said nothing to Tally about Pirt's adventure with the Tiny Princess but I did tell her what the druggist told me about his purchases of depilatories.

"Poor little guy," she said.



Often when I have a question I can't find an answer to in the almanac or encyclopedia I ask Prof.

You have to understand about Prof, who's no academic despite his nickname. He's eccentric but he's not the nut some think he is. He reads everything and believes less than half of it, even if it is being said by the world's greatest authorities. He remembers too many feet of clay, clouded crystal balls, off-target oracles. He should; he's a former press agent.

Tally says Prof gets his facts from the National Enquirer but she exaggerates. He enjoys the Enquirer because it mirrors what an impressive number of Americans like to read. He has as much fun reading the New York Times for the chinks in its armor of pomposity and infallibility. He loves to bait the Times when it stubs its toe, whether in misspellings, its occasionally inaccurate crossword puzzle definition or its quirky backing of that expedition to find the Loch Ness monster.

I could do as well or better at the reference room of U North but Prof lives just down the road. Besides, he keeps a supply of cool Canadian ale. I also like his library. I call it a library; it's more like the den of a domesticated animal, littered with back copies of newspapers and magazines he has not yet read, letters he means to answer, rocks he's picked up, catalogs, circulars, theater programs, marmalade crocks full of fountain pens and books, books, books.

The books hide the walls. They're in piles on tables and heaps on the floor. They sprawl across his desk. They sit in unopened cartons from publishers and mail-order remainder houses. He's forever trying to make more room for them and keep them in some sort of order. He has categories — history, geography, religion, North Country, word origins — I once counted 74 dictionaries — but the categories expand and the books within them grow, and it's a losing battle.

Prof has his own filing system. Say he clips a newspaper story on spelunking. It goes into the back or front of an appropriate book, such as "Underground Empire," Clay Perry's fine work on cave exploring in New York. Some of his books bulge so with clippings that their bindings have begun to crack. I hide him about this but he replies that he owns the books; they don't own him. Nobody owns him. Years ago he retired young and well off from public relations work. He's a bachelor.

I went to see Prof about prehistoric man. He pretended I'd come to play chess and got out the board. I lost track of how many games we played and, more particularly, how much ale I had drunk. At home later I woke from a nightmarish replay of our evening.

Prof had taken me from one topic to another. When he got to ancient man, one of his favorites, I kept him on it and he grew expansive, jumping up to pluck a book or magazine from his shelves, showing me this reference or that, pointing to a clipping that served as a bookmark, or to a pencil note in a margin sourced to a broadcast. Thrown at me that way, it seemed overwhelming evidence that we were John-

nies come lately to our planet.

That part of the evening had been real. I was sure the two of us had talked of each of these things, had examined each marked paragraph or footnote or clipping or note, and that I could go back to Prof's house tonight and see each of them again.

But in the nightmare replay there were three of us. Pirt was there too, sitting like a precocious, indulged child on the edge of Prof's fifteenth century sideboard, his feet dangling, punctuating our talk with personal comments. He was eating an orange, careless of how juice squirted on the furniture. When I remonstrated with him Prof said, "It's the same as lemon oil. Nourishes the wood. Sandia man, now, was a comparative newcomer..."

"My nephew," Pirt said. "Solomon Sandia, son of the chief camel-tender of the great southwest."

Prof: "Minnesota man, however, was really a 15-year-old girl."

Pirt: "Was she my cousin Lucy? She'd be hurt if we forgot her."

Prof: "A great sea once lapped the shores that are North Arabia's hills."

Pirt: "I swam in that sea — floated, drifted, evolving, not sure what form I would take when I crawled out to sun myself dry."

Prof: "There's a note here about archaeopteryx, the oldest known bird."

Pirt: "Once I thought I'd like to be a bird..."

Prof: "Amphioxus lived on sandy beaches. Wormlike. A brain of sorts but no cranium."

Pirt: "But I had to crawl before I could fly."

Prof: "Bryozoa...Australopithecine..."

Pirt: "That's me. Graceful, fleet of foot."

Prof: "Homo habilis. You had to kill to survive."

Pirt: "I am one with them all, wherever and whenever they were. I alone survived. I was taken when they were young and have returned still young when they are millennia old. I am both the first and the last man but a child still."

"I was kept in an extraterrestrial limbo, suspended beyond the moon but closer than the stars. They visited from time to time, dutifully imparting knowledge, but said little of their plan for me. I think they lost sight of it as they lived and died, bequeathing their responsibilities to others who carried on by rote and tradition."

"I was returned to a changed Earth. An obeah woman saw that I was adopted by a Hispanic mother who'd lost a son my age. My foster mother, a widow, was always wary of changeling me. She was glad when the obeah woman placed me among kids who were going north from the ghetto to the land of my natural childhood."

I wanted to ask a question but Prof motioned me to silence. Pirt, or whatever he was, went on, talking to me:

"I knew I was home when I found the ancient rocks overlooking the vanished sea. I remembered how it had been. A low haze was like the surface of the long-gone waters. A distant airplane soared like a pteranodon in the



unchanging vastness of sky."

In that dreamy dialog I thought I heard Prof observe: "Man and mammoth did not mix."

But from Pirt, less a reply than a voicing of yearnings recalled, "Creatures of the upper air. My imaginary friends."

Pirt swabbed a dribble of orange with a hairy arm and smiled at me. "You wondered why I stole away from your house so often. I went to where I'd lived long ago. It was less strange there and after a while I could come home again to you and Tally, and know your warmth. So much the same and yet different — no animal skins now or rocky cave; no oil heat then or faggot fire now."

"But my love for you is what I felt then! The glow of belonging. Must I leave again? Am I only a slum kid you shelter in obligation to a charity? I want to be wanted here. This is my land and these are my people no matter how much has changed. Have I changed? Am I not the kid I once was, the boy you and Tally never had?"

"Don't let me go back to that place between worlds. Please help me — keep me. Don't let them take me. Please keep me; help me. Please..."

I awoke, my mouth dry and blood pounding at my temples. Too much ale? Too much Pirt? I got up carefully, not to disturb Tally. It was quarter to five. I went to the bathroom and washed down aspirin with two glasses of water.

I went to Pirt's room. He wasn't there or anywhere in the house. I stumbled back to bed. I slept.

An ice-age creature, naked and hair-covered but recognizable as Pirt, was pursued across snowy wastes by someone all in white on a modern snowmobile. The rider was brandishing a spear gun. The machine was silent. The only sound was the crunch of the caveman's feet as he ran with incredible speed across the crusted snow.

I awoke in a sweat, aware that I'd been rooting for the Snowmobile Rider.

There really was a Snowmobile Rider.

Our area has no real caves for the returning caveman. We don't have the soft rocks that water cuts through so well. We do have some artificial caves. The talc mine near Edwards. Some abortive diggings farther north, left by the geologists who'd come during World War II, looking for sources of sulfuric acid.

Then there's the area known as North Arabia deep in the wilderness that's left blank on topographic maps. Somebody owned it years ago but it's reverted since to state land. There's the mouth of a cave in North Arabia that some say is connected to Sunday Rock. Some say that cave is the secret home of a favorite North Country legend, the Phantom Snowmobile Rider. Some say. Legends abound and history gets twisted.

But the Phantom Snowmobile Rider is too well documented to have been legend alone. He rode only at

night but was seen the year round. I suppose the vehicle he used in the warm months should have had another name but everybody called it a snowmobile, in season and out. He dressed all in white, the color of his machine. In the winter he wore fur gloves and boots and what seemed to be a white nylon snowsuit. A helmet masked his face. A long white scarf trailed behind him as if he were piloting a Spad over France in World War I.

An eerie thing was the silence of his machine. Some said he was a professor of mechanical engineering at U North who had perfected a noiseless engine. He took his invention to the General Motors people at Rooseveltown, but they wouldn't listen to him. So he went back to his lab one night with a U-Haul and removed the equipment he'd built for his experiments. He vanished into the wilderness past Sunday Rock, where it was said he built an underground laboratory.

Legends grow when facts are few. Myths die hard if people want to believe them. A friend of mine in U North's academic affairs office recalled an associate professor of mechanical engineering whose specialty was internal combustion engines. He'd left several years ago to be chairman of a department at a land-grant university in the midwest and was still there.

Nevertheless we had a Snowmobile Rider. Too many people had seen him for anyone to doubt it. My friend Bob Kenzie the fire watcher saw him from his tower atop Mount Eyrie. "He must have been doing forty-five, silent as the wind," Bob said. "He came out of a copse into the open and did big figure-eights on the flat land where Northern Stone has mineral rights. Then he got into rough country and I had only glimpses of him through the trees. Saw him rear up and leap a gully fifteen feet across. I went and measured it the next day."

Joe, a trapper friend, told me he went out drunk one night and got caught in one of his own traps. He fainted or passed out. When he came to he was free and there were snowmobile tracks coming and going. I tend to discount this, even though Joe showed me the cuts on his foot.

A more reliable witness was Trooper Sam Medicis of the State Police. He was going south along the part of Route 56 that we call the Prairie because it's so straight and flat. He was hitting 90 when the Snowmobile Rider came from behind him and passed him, raising a white glove in salute and going out of sight. Maybe Sam exaggerated his speed — he's proud of his youthful laurels as a stock car racer — but I don't doubt that he saw the Rider.

It was wrong of Tally to have tried to keep the fawn, of course. It had limped in, hurt, to the field behind the barn and certainly the first thing she should have done was call the conservation officer. Instead she tried to comfort it and bind up its wound. Even that was okay.

But then Tally began to make a pet of it, and that was wrong. Maybe it was in her heritage — her grandmother

had been a girl in Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings country. "The Yearling" and all that.

At any rate she fed it and put it in the barn for overnight. She stayed with it until late, making sure there was no way it could get out and hurt itself again, or be attacked, then went to bed.

Who knows what happened? Pirt had been out late, too, on one of his prowls in the dead sea bottoms that haunted his thinking. He was returning home, probably after reliving the life of an ancestral hunter, when he heard a noise in the barn. And when he opened the door and the fawn ran out it wasn't our Pirt but a caveman from thousands of years ago who leapt on it and killed it, never mind how.

Probably that's the way it happened. Pirt really wasn't to blame. But of course he shouldn't have cut off the fawn's tail and taken it to his bed, where Tally found it in the morning.

A thing that happened was the Long Noon. The Book of Joshua tells us the sun stayed in the midst of heaven and did not hasten to go down for about a whole day. There have been long hot days in our village but none like that particular time.

Some of us at the station go out at noon and seek a cool spot. On this particular day I took a sandwich and a cold soda to the shade of a tree on a bank of the river that divides our village. It's the same river that Pirt felt sorry for, only lower down. I had a book with me and dozed over it after eating. I looked up with a start, fearing I'd overstayed the lunch hour, but was reassured by the position of the sun. From my usual comfortable place against an old oak I knew I needn't start back until the sun reached a point behind the top of a tall poplar on the opposite bank.

Again I dozed, lulled by the murmur of the river and the warmth of the day.

People came and talked to me in the Long Noon. Prof came. "Pirt's a scout," he said.

"A boy scout?" I asked.

"Would that he were. No, I suspect he's the advance man for an expedition of aliens."

"Aliens? You mean like—?"

"Extraterrestrials, right. Or at least people who left Earth a long time ago and have now come back for another look."

"But why a kid like Pirt?" I asked. "And why send him here?"

"We know Pirt isn't as young as he pretends. And I think there's a clue in the anorthosite."

"Anorthosite?"

I remembered. We had made our way into the international news when two astronauts went moonwalking and found anorthosite up there. It was only a small detail of the Apollo 15 flight but was big news here in the North Country, one of the few places on Earth where anorthosite is found. Dave Scott was in a crater called Spur, on the Apennine Front, when he found a chunk of the rock. The

astronauts had been looking for it, apparently.

Prof called my attention to the fact that *anorthosite* carries in it the word *north*. Specialists had told us on TV that the rock conceivably dated back four billion and some years to the beginning of the solar system.

Prof sounded professorial: "The anorthosite massif in the Adirondacks once lay under 20 miles of other rock. It has been described as a subterranean layer two miles thick atop two huge pillars. Hard-rock geologists prefer not to speculate but to at least one old Adirondack hand this summons up the picture of a capstone and its supports at Stonehenge, but deep in the earth and millennia more ancient.

"And when a sober-sided science encyclopedia in its article on anorthosite refers enigmatically to 'very curious circumstances' we laymen have a right to wonder..."

Pirt replaced Prof there beside me in the Long Noon.

"Are you four billion years old?" I asked him.

"Are you kidding?" he said. "That's when things began, not people."

"But you're more than ten thousand years old. You didn't just come over on the land bridge."

"I'm no child," he said.

"Of course not. How old are you really?"

But Pirt wandered off.

Phantom friends keep coming through;

I have a sense of *deja vu*...

Loretta LaJoie was there in the Long Noon. I'd never seen Loretta, only spoken on the telephone, but I recognized her there.

"One of the astronauts called it Genesis Rock," Loretta said. "That was James Irwin. He said they found it with God's help."

Loretta LaJoie also said she liked Pirt better than those other cavemen, B.C. and Alley Oop.

The Phantom Snowmobile Rider came and talked to me there in the Long Noon: "Up with a roar and over the hill and down. Then coasting, seeking the dark spot that is the entrance to the cave that only I have found. Then into it, lights now on as I navigate the turns I know so well but which another would fail to find. I've lost the pursuers, whether on my tail or scientifically seeking me out. I am safe in my burrow here in the cavern where it is always 50 degrees fahrenheit."

"...illusions like the flight of time..."

Busky Kimp drove onto the grass in a pickup truck. It was *loaded* — fog lights, running lights, spotlight, flashers, roll bar, tow bar, air horn, gun racks but no guns, CB radio, buggy-whip antenna, oversize all-terrain tires, spoke wheels, helper springs, wide cab, running board, racing stripe.

The pickup was brand new but he said he hadn't bought it. "It's a lulu," he told me.

I said it certainly was.

"I mean the Awaiters provided me with it in lieu of salary," Busky said. "In lieu of. That's what they call in



Albany a lulu." He knew I knew that; he wanted me to know he was in solid with the Awaiters.

I gave him the satisfaction. "It's very nice for you."

"She's the sweetest little vehicle I ever did see," he said. I saw nothing little about her. "She'll take you anywhere you want to go."

Busky drove off, silent like the Snowmobile Rider.

A reverie stole over me. I checked the position of the sun behind the poplar. All was hot and still.

...ancestral memories of incandescent ooze...

Pirt drifted past but did not look at me or speak. I imagined a marvelous device, a kind of lingualog or oral diary that enabled me to hear the voice in which he thought.

"Damn the hair! If I were ten years older I could be a freak, a youth-cultist, and let it grow. But I look too young to pass. So I hide in the bathroom and pretend to take long showers while I depilate myself..."

"I have to keep reminding myself that I'm *not* seven or nine or 12 years old, that I'm an adult on a mission and must reject terrestrial influences. But they do get to me. Sometimes I'm carried away in my role of a kid in the country.

"I go to the Place Between with loathing and yearning. It's fascinating and depressing. Yet it calls me irresistibly. It's like going home again, even if the only one to greet me is a lone perianodon that floats lazily in the sky and looks at me only to reject me as inedible.

"I'm the forgotten man when I go back. Nobody there but little misfit me, little sport, little mutant out of his time.

"I walk the beaches between sea and land, the divider between what was and what will be. I'm the tie that binds the primordial past to the putative future where I'm to play an unlearned role.

"Where do I belong? The dichotomy — trichotomy — gets me. Am I the simple savage — basket weaver, mound builder, tool maker, cousin to Miss Minnesota Man? Am I the Ghetto Kid savoring simple country pleasures? Or am I the emissary of a race as advanced, proportionately, as Mac is to my beachwalking self?"

Pirt's words faded. I roused myself and looked at my watch. It showed ten past two. But the positions of the sun and the poplar were unchanged. Was this reality?

There was another voice but no shape went with it. "Be of good cheer," it said. "As Socrates urged Meno, try to recollect what you do not remember." How could I do that?

I got up and stretched. I put my soda can in the recycle bin and the sandwich wrapper in my pocket. I walked back toward the center of town. The sidewalk clock outside Jason's Reliable Jewelers agreed with what my watch said now: two-sixteen.

I passed Patrolman Ed Blake, who waved and said: "Too hot to write tickets, Mac. I put in a dime where you're over-parked so I don't have to ticket you on my way back."

"Thanks, Ed," I said. "Guess I lost track of time."

I went into Druger's News to buy a paper and get change

of a dollar. Dave Druger said: "Thank God for air conditioning. Hottest day I ever recall."

"It's as if the sun's standing still," I said.

"You noticed that? Time often crawls but this is ridiculous."

In my office I drew the blinds to make it seem cooler while I did some work. At 4:28 by the electric clock on my desk, when I'd finished, I looked out between the blinds. The shadows weren't where they should have been.

I turned on the monitor and heard Bernie O'Neill race through the copy for Campus Clothiers, who had written it too long, as usual.

"Now stay tuned for North News on the half hour," Bernie said; he plugged in the cassette with the teletype sounds. "It's 4:30 p.m. Eastern Daylight Savings Time by the newsroom clock but it's high noon by the sun." He'd cued a record to play a few seconds of the movie music from "High Noon." I hoped he'd elaborate. As if he'd heard me he said: "There's been no explanation for the phenomenon, which seems to be a local one. South of us in Utica, Rome and Syracuse we're told the sun is where it should be at this time. To the north in Canada all is normal. Vermont to the east reports nothing unusual. WNOR News talked a few minutes ago to Clayton Harris, professor of physics at the University of the North, an expert in spectroscopy."

I made a mental note to give Bernie a raise, or at least a bonus.

The taped voice of Harris said: "I can only conjecture that we're experiencing a refractive effect. That is, atmospheric conditions may be such that although the sun appears to be at its zenith, it is actually in its proper position relative to us at this time and we are seeing a reflection. The heavy clouds on the horizon could be a factor."

Bernie asked: "Are you saying it's an optical illusion?"

"That would be a way to put it."

I'm sure Clay Harris went on but Bernie wisely stopped the tape at that point.

"That was Dr. Clayton Harris of U North with his comments on our protracted noon, the longest lunch hour in the history of the Northland. The time is now 4:34 p.m., despite what the sun says, and the temperature is 96 degrees. We asked the State Police the extent of the illusion, if that's what it is, and Capt. Hammond Parrish told us it seems to be limited to the St. Lawrence County area although he could give no explanation. We'll be back with more local news after this message from Druger's News, headquarters for periodicals, sunglasses and sunburn lotion."

I decided Bernie O'Neill deserved a raise and a bonus. My phone rang as the taped commercial played. It was Bernie: "Sorry I couldn't report to you sooner, Mac, but I've been kind of busy."

"I heard."

"The State Police say Pirt's been seen on North Arabia. He's all right, apparently; Pirt seemed to be shooting the sun with a sextant and then breaking off to signal. Using a



mirror, maybe. The trooper didn't see any answering flashes."

I thanked Bernie and he was back on the air in seconds with the rest of the local news. It was routine — nothing about our undersized Summer Resident on a prehistoric hilltop taking readings and communicating with Lord knew who.

I decided to go to North Arabia. First I called home. Tally said the drone of bees in the meadow was deafening and that Taffy, our Siamese, was walking round and round, howling. How about a big salad bowl for supper and maybe an iced honeydew? Not a word about the sun in the sky. Often Tally doesn't notice the time and is surprised that my day is over before her afternoon has begun.

I drove past U North and took the unmapped turnoff that led to North Arabia through the reforested area. The land fell away as the car climbed. The trees thinned and I looked out over the great valley that once was an inland sea. North Arabia, one of time's untouched relics, thrust up out of the darker earth, higher than the highlands. Barren, corrugated by wind and rain, it was a piece of the Middle East in New York. The road, never much, became a track. I parked and walked.

There was no sign of Pirt. The trooper could have seen him from the road on the other side, far below.

I climbed and slid, getting fine sand in my shoes. At well after 5 p.m., clock time, the sun burned straight down.

I was wet through when I reached the top, gasping, my tongue furry. From the height I saw in all directions the land I loved, baking and shimmering, the St. Lawrence River and Canada beyond, obscured by low clouds. But though I was at the highest point, there was no sign of a small man-child. I could have been the first one there, my tracks the only human disturbance since time began.

I sat and suffered the heat. I scooped up sand I could scarcely hold and let it trickle through my fingers. Damn the boy! Where had he gone and what had he done before he went?

"Hello, Uncle Mac," he said from behind me. I hadn't the strength to turn around. Then he was in front of me, grinning, the whole St. Lawrence Valley shimmering behind him. He had no sextant, no heliograph. He stood brown in a pair of faded khaki shorts. They were too big for him. An old web belt kept them up.

"Were you signaling from up here? Somebody thought he saw you."

"I was talking to my friends, yes," Pirt said.

"With what?"

"Belt buckle." Shiny old brass belt buckle.

"Who are your friends?"

"The ones who stopped the sun," he said.

We didn't talk about it any more then.

"It's time to go home," I said. "Tally's making a salad. And honeydew melon."

"I like honeydew melon. Could I have ice cream in it?"

"Sure. We'll get some on the way."

At midnight by our kitchen clock the sun was overhead and the thermometer said 108.

The hum of bees was subdued but steady, as if they had adjusted to the new way and were doing the minimum required of them now that they'd noticed. Taffy the cat, exhausted by her pacing, had curled up in the forbidden chair, and was asleep but dreaming and complaining, the black end of her tail twitching.

Pirt had eaten Tally's salad and put away two ice cream-filled honeydew halves and was listening to the radio. Tally and I played cards. Nobody felt like going to bed. The phone rang.

It was Bernie O'Neill, still at the station.

"What are you doing there?" I asked him.

"I wanted to see this through."

"There's certainly sun enough to see by. I'm getting a little bored with it."

"You've been listening to the news?"

"And I'm no wiser. What does Professor Harris have to say now?"

"Harris took his phone off the hook hours ago. Listen, Mac, there's stuff I haven't put on the air, like the Golden Spaceships."

"The what?"

"You remember the Awaiters; one of them called up. Said he'd seen a fleet of Golden Spaceships over Hogley Flow."

"It wouldn't be the first thing the Awaiters saw."

"Right. But he said one ship drifted down and became transparent and he saw people inside."

"Yeah? What were they doing?"

"Smiling, waving, friendly. Talking to him."

"He understood them, of course."

"Of course. They told him they had a message of love and deliverance for the Awaiters and they would go away soon but they had an emissary on Earth. They told the Awaiters to seek him out because he would fulfill their prophecies by smiting the sinners and showing the true way to salvation."

"You paraphrase, of course, if you were talking to the chief spokesman for the Awaiters, Busky Kimp."

"That's him. I've got it on tape in his own quaint speech."

"Quaint but not without a certain sophistication. Did Busky say who the emissary was?"

"Somebody named Bert. That's what he said. I asked him to spell it and he said B as in Behold, E as in Ecclesiastes, R as in Revelation, T as in Thessalonians."

I felt a chill. "B as in Boy?"

"That's the letter. I thought to myself that maybe he hadn't heard too well, that maybe it wasn't B as in Boy but —"

"P as in Pirt. He's right here. Thanks, Bernie. I appreciate —"

"Sure. I'll knock off now. I'd better sack out on the reception couch if I'm to be any good for sign-on."

"I'll bring coffee at a quarter to six," I said.

At about 2 a.m. and as quickly as happens in the tropics the sun *set*, or went *down*, or *out*, or however to describe it. Merciful darkness enclosed us.

I'm sure that if the phenomenon had occurred in Westchester, Bethesda or Burbank, some place convenient to a major news center, we'd have heard about it endlessly. But because it had taken place in a relatively remote area the national media kissed it off as a trick of refraction and treated it silly season style — something to end a newscast with.

It was all over in 14 hours, causing no more excitement outside the North Country than a new flying saucer sighting. After all, nobody got hurt. The worst I heard was a report of exhaustion among laying hens.

(Hello! Again! Call me Omniscent Observer or call me O₂ but don't call me late to Armageddon. There's a simple explanation for the phenomenon your narrator has chosen to call the Long Noon. I could give it to you at this point but I am aware that to you all points in time are not the same, as they are to me. So I'll let the explanation come from MacSwan at a time geared to his understanding and therefore to yours. But it may be appropriate now for me to tell you the story I call "Of Time and the Pig.")

(The city man, on vacation in the country, was watching a farmer feed his pigs. The farmer picked up a pig, held it in his arms and let it eat from a big bowl. When the pig had had enough the farmer put it down and picked up the next pig and fed it the same way, and so on. Finally the city man could stand it no longer. He said, "Look, I'm no expert on feeding pigs, but isn't that an awful waste of time?" But the farmer replied, "What's time to a pig?"

(Do you like that story? It's in one of our standard tapes, "A Concise but Comprehensive Cultural History of Terrestriality, Copiously Anecdoted." Not that I equate you Terrestrials with pigs. I cite the story only to illustrate my difficulty in differentiating between past and future. As I have said, or will say, time is such a constant for me that I tend to forget your present can be my past, and that the things you're going through, and worrying about in what you call *now*, are over and done with for us.

(So time is full of wrinkles, paradoxes, redundancies, tautologies. It's taut for some, looser for others. Hang loose, I say. And Terrestriality is an untidy place, full of misconceptions, unanswered questions. That's how life can be on Planet 3 — unstructured, so much left to chance. I much prefer Summa, the other place I look after, where everything runs by the book and nothing is chancey. In Summa everybody knows his future and does exactly what's planned for him. It's a neat place and now I've got to get back to it. Meanwhile I return you to MacSwan, the man with the avian name, but hang loose and don't feel that you have to believe everything he tells you. Remember, he once made a living telling fairy tales.)

Miss Loretta LaJoie called me up. "Benign Visitors, are they?" she said. "Figments dreamed up by Benighted Vi-

sionaries is what they are. And the Awaiters are Visionary Dreamers, if that's not a tautology."

I couldn't get a word in. She went on: "You must remember BVD's, but do you know what the initials stood for originally? BVD's — Better Ventilated Drawers. That's right. It would do the Awaiters a world of good if somebody knocked a little sense into them — ventilated their dreams before they get hurt, the deluded lambs! I recognize people's rights to their own ways of worship, and even taking some parts of the Bible literally, but this nonsense — my Lord! Benign Visitors? Damfoolishness!"

Later I looked up benighted. Miss Loretta had it exactly right — "to benight" is to involve in the night, or error or superstition; and "benighted" is to be involved in obscurity.

The Long Noon was a contact, she said, but not with the Awaiters. The contact had been with Pirt, or with Busky Kimp, she wasn't sure which, she told me.

And actually the sun had not stopped. Miss Loretta said, nor had the Earth's rotation been interrupted. Just as the sun moving through the sky is an illusion resulting from the rotation of the Earth, the rotation hadn't been stopped. We'd have known it if it had — didn't I remember "The Man Who Could Work Miracles" with everything flying through the air, including poor George McWhirter Fotheringay?

"That scientist on WNOR was right to say it was all refraction," Miss Loretta went on. "It was an alien scout ship we saw, so bright it dimmed out the sun, which kept moving as always."

"We were seeing the scout ship of an alien civilization?" I said when I was able to interrupt. "Brighter than the sun? Talking to Pirt or Busky Kimp? For 14 hours?"

"Now you stop putting words in my mouth, young man," Loretta said. "Nobody was 'talking for 14 hours.' Even I can't do that. The scout ship was recharging its solar batteries. The brightness was the ship absorbing all that accumulating energy. And when the sun went down, so to speak — went below the horizon — it ended. That's all."

I wanted to know how come the phenomenon was so localized that nobody saw it outside our area.

"Because that's where the scout ship was — right here above us."

"But —"

"The other thing I wanted to say —" and Loretta went on to talk about poetry and glassmaking.

"Wait a minute," I said.

"No, you wait. The clue is in Coleridge. Kubla Khan. A useless sea. Caverns measureless to man. A miracle of rare device. It's all there for anyone to read."

"Miss LaJoie —" I said.

"People say there can't be caves up here because there's no soft limestone for the water to seep through and hollow out. Nonsense. That's nature's way and it takes forever. So the aliens gave the Awaiters a tool to make their own caves, to slice through the earth, hollow it out instantly to prepare for the main event, so to speak."

Visions of the old Buck Rogers comic strip zapped

through my head. "You mean the aliens gave Busky Kimp a disintegrator — something that could wipe us all out?"

"They didn't give it to Busky. They gave it to the Snowmobile Rider."

"Another nut," I said.

"Busky only attached it to the Snowmobile Rider's machine, like an extra headlight. And it's not a disintegrator, for heaven's sake."

"Then what is it?"

"It's a tunnel. A portable glass furnace. That's why the Rider wears that white suit, as protection against the terrific heat generated in carving the caves of glass."

"Glass caves?"

"Tunnels, anyway."

"That's ridiculous," I said. "Do you expect me to believe in Captain Horatio Glassblower, the Phantom Snowmobile Rider, and his Caves of Glittering Glass? Victor Appleton, here we come!"

"Don't be facetious. You communicators are supposed to have open minds. Tell me, what do we have more of in the North Country than anything else?"

"Dimwits and dingbats?"

"Sand. Dig down anywhere and there it is. And what is sand good for?"

"Beaches."

"Making glass. All the key ingredients are in the ground under our feet — quartz sand, dolomite, feldspar."

"But tunnels of glass? How fragile can you get?"

"Pyrex is fragile? How about rocket exhaust systems?"

"All right. Where do these caverns, these tunnels, go?"

But Loretta LaJoie had told me all she wanted to tell.

I had to get away from the office. I went to see Prof.

On the way to Prof's house I was aware of sand everywhere I looked. Piles of sand, churches and public buildings made of red Potsdam sandstone, desertlike stretches of dune. Sand piled high outside highway department garages, sandy beaches, sand, sand.

I drove up the hill past the nineteenth century spaceship and took the turn to Higley Flow.

It was the wrong time for chess but Prof was always agreeable to conversation. I told him what Loretta had said about the Awaiters and the portable glassmaker that now seemed to be so much more than a soundless snowmobile.

Prof listened, nodding, but I could see that he wanted to talk. He obviously had his own theories but they were conditioned by his many years as a ghost, a man in the background. Even now in retirement he gave no clue whether the views he voiced were his, or those of his sources, or an amalgam. In short, he gave me an unattributed background briefing and, in a nutshell, it came out something like this:

The aliens first arrived on Earth between ten thousand and a few billion years ago and commandeered an ancestor of Pirt to see how our planet was getting along, evolution-wise.

The aliens always have laboratory ships roaming the universe and they kept the caveman aboard one of them, watching him evolve over the millennia. The aliens returned

to Earth every so often to compare the captive with his Earthly cousins — the dawn men who'd remained here. But somewhere along the line they forgot about him. That was understandable. They had scores of lab craft out there still and it wouldn't be unreasonable to assume that headquarters lost track of a minor experiment now and then. Prof chuckled; he explained that he had been going to say the aliens were only human.

So the Awaiters were not as nutty as one might think. There really were watchers up there. Of course they weren't in golden spaceships and there was nothing religious about them.

I wanted to know who Prof thought Pirt was — a descendant of the captives or a terrestrial throwback?

Prof said a case could be made that Pirt lived simultaneously on two worlds — three if you include ancient Earth. He was not a clone or a simulacrum but a product of the oneness of all time in the infinity of the universe. Something like that; Prof had put it better. Thus Pirt could by turns be primitive, sophisticated, earthy, alien, stupid, brilliant, caring, callous, a child, a man, or combinations of all these.

Could Pirt be in two places at once?

Why not? It did not matter how close or far apart those places were — on Earth and on the alien planet, in the present and back in caveman time, here in the house and out on the dunes of North Arabia!

Prof waxed philosophical. It was as if Pirt lived in the Eternal Now, he said; there was neither past nor present, only this moment in time. Thus we could understand why he sometimes was unaware of cause and effect, of how a present act was related to the past, or that he might be responsible for the consequences of a past action, or that something he did now might have future repercussions. In that respect Pirt was like an animal — not immoral but simply amoral, primitive.

The aliens must have programmed Pirt to live among us for a time and then leave, carrying knowledge about us they could have gathered no other way, Prof said.

I thought: Poor Pirt, unwitting betrayer! Pitiable man-boy, younger than most of us, older than any. Bearded youth, ancestor-child, anachronism in our midst. He'd been loved and feared by us just as he'd troubled his foster mother in that city slum. Our ignorance of what he was, or had been changed into, matched hers. She had let him be sent away. What would we do?

I couldn't tell the chasers from the chased. Nor did I know who was good and who bad. Nobody wore white except the Phantom Snowmobile Rider, as usual.

But I'd better rewind this part of the account before it's as confused as the scene I'm trying to describe.

First the telephone call.

It was the news phone but Bernie was on the air so I answered. A woman's voice I didn't recognize said: "The caveman's going to the spaceship."

When I said "What?" she said "Oh you're not — Never mind. Just tell Bernie," and hung up.

Before I had time to think there was a call on the other phone, the business number.

"Be at the nineteenth century spaceship," Pirt said in a voice she failed to disguise.

I said: "What's up, Pirt? When?"

"Oh, Uncle Mac, just get over there, please," he said, reverting to his little boy voice but adding a newsroom word: "Soonest." He hung up.

I tried to reach Tally but she wasn't home. Bernie came off his shift. I grabbed him and told him about the calls. We got in his car and raced toward the abandoned water tower. "I'll take the Back Hannawa Road," he said. "Less traffic."

Everybody and his cousin seemed to be taking the short cut that morning. Bernie gave up trying to pass cars and trucks and motorcycles after he realized we were all going at maximum speed anyway.

"Hey, there's Busky Kimp," Bernie said, waving at a gaudy pickup two vehicles ahead. He mentioned other names, all belonging to Awaiters who were either riding with Busky in the truck or going the same way on other sets of wheels.

Bernie parked at the edge of the road so we could look down on the big open area the tower dominated with the river running alongside it. The road was about level with the base of the solid part of the tower, the part that sat on tall wooden legs. Thus we were looking straight across at a door, or hatch, in the fuselage of what my imagination had chosen earlier to think of as a crude space-traveling machine, maybe of Verne vintage.

Little did I know then, as they say in the old novels! Had I but known!

A tiny figure scrambled out of the bushes atop long hills of sand shaped like solidified ocean rollers that were a backdrop to the abandoned tower. The figure, in a running crouch, went to one of the supports and began to climb. Unclothed, it looked like an ape but of course it was Pirt. Under the hair was the civilized skin he'd worn for a season with the summer parents who'd taken him in with love and hope. Pirt, undepilated, had reverted to what he'd been before he assumed his little-boy guise to take us in for whatever his reasons were. But maybe he didn't need reasons, only a loyalty to something I'd never understand.

The Snowmobile Rider glided up. The all-white figure simply appeared, outlined against sky on the crest of a wave of sand. Later I saw the tunnel that ended there after its passage through the earth from Sunday Rock. But at the time the machine seemed to materialize out of air, a wondrous effect as by a stage magician.

I'd had my suspicions but now I knew who the Snowmobile Rider was. I'm fairly certain nobody else did. My means of identification was, I trusted, unique.

When the Phantom Snowmobile Rider whisedrived onto the scene, silent as the wind, goggled, costumed, and started firing, presumably everybody's attention was on the weapon. This was the thing that looked like an off-center headlight, the alien gadget that sent out superheated particles capable of instantly fusing sand into glass.

The rider maneuvered the machine to certain angle and a beam of something brighter than lightning shot out and consumed a brace for one of the wooden supports of the water tower.

Horatio Glassblower and his Pyrex Perambulator, I thought. Only it wasn't a *he* or a *his*.

Naturally everybody was watching the action. Everybody but me. My gaze was drawn to the callipygian curve of the rider's rear, the sweet bend of her bottom. I recognized it, even under the white nylon that encased it. It was the tush of my Tally. I'd have known it anywhere.

What I could not understand was why my dear wife should be shooting at our quasi-adoptive son, Pirt.

Pirt by this time had hauled himself up the underpinning of the tower to the hatch. He'd been quick, sure-footed and sure-fingered. Pirt disappeared inside the hatch and it occurred to me that maybe the one-gal Pyrex posse hadn't shot to kill. It was possible she had been speeding him on his way before she sped off herself apparently unrecognized except by me.

Others were shooting, first at Pirt, then at the tower, including some of the Awaiters but not Busky Kimp, who stood watching everything with a sad face.

Flame spouted from the tail of the tower-spaceship. The exhaust became painful to watch. The wooden undergirding burned away and the tower, transformed, hovered atop the inferno.

Pirt and his craft lifted off then, the pillar of fire a roaring background to potshots from below.

"I got him, the bastard," a World War II sharpshooter said with satisfaction. Maybe he did, but it didn't slow Pirt or change his trajectory.

I seemed to get a message in a tinny voice broadcast as from a weak transmitter; "Remember me sometimes. Welcome the next stranger."

Fat chance, brother, I thought, and looked around for Tally. She and her machine had disappeared in the low scrubland between the tower and the road.

A dozen or so Awaiters were making their way back down the long hill. The pilgrims, their promised land snatched from them, were returning to the shacks and tents they thought they'd abandoned forever.

Prof detached himself from a little swarm of sightseers and said to Bernie and me: "The comet they once thought to ride became a red herring. Sad, sad; like the fiery tears of St. Lawrence."

"What?" Bernie said.

"Tears of the saint are said to presage disaster. 'Disasters in the sun' — Hamlet. You're not taping me, are you?"

"I know better than that. But go on; I've got a good memory."

"Meteor swarms have been seen during church festivals in August. The festival of St. Lawrence. An Arabian legend says shooting stars, maybe comets, are fiery projectiles angels fling at interlopers storming heaven."

"I like that," Bernie said. "But I hope the angels don't shoot down Pirt."

"I doubt that Pirt, unlike some, is trying to get to heaven."

A second group of Awaiters unknotted, revealing Busky Kimp. They started down the road, moving slowly. Bernie

called: "Busky! Where are you going?"

"Going with these good people."

"But it's all over. What's left for you?"

"There'll be another day. My friends will take care of me till then."

"Nobody's mad at you?"

"For what?" Busky asked. "For my public relations efforts? These good folk had the word before I joined them. It's them converted me, Bernie. Turn that thing on if you want. I don't mind telling the world the Benign Visitors will be coming for us in their Golden Spaceships. We just got the day wrong."

One of the Awaiters in the group Busky had been in called to him: "Come along, Brother Kimp."

"Explaining about the postponement," Busky told him.

"Our fault entirely," the man said. "We got the spaceships confused, that's all." He looked at the smoldering place where the water tower had become a rocket ship. "That little craft could never have taken all of us."

"Coming, brother," Busky said.

Bernie asked Prof: "What do you think of that?"

"People change," Prof said. One P.R. man of another. I wondered if Busky had been one of Prof's sources along with the National Enquirer.

"Here comes the law," Bernie said.

Sheriff's patrol cars and emergency vehicles, sirens wailing, sped up the long hill from town. The Awaiters moved to one side of the road to let them pass.

Then the sirens were drowned out by the roar of a snowmobile engine. Racing toward us from the other direction was the Phantom Snowmobile Rider, white-clad as always but no longer a silent waitress.

Our group scattered off the road but I didn't go as fast or as far as the others. The Phantom Rider sped along the shoulder, engine racing and gravel scattering, and made a 180-degree turn around me. "Hop on," said a gruff voice. I did, clapping my arms around a thoroughly familiar waist. We headed south, toward the woods, in a torrent of noise.

"That was some entrance," I yelled.

"What?"

"How come all the noise?" I shouted into her ear.

"No planned theatrics," she yelled back. "Lost my muffler in the gully."

We were out of sight of the group at the takeoff place and off the road, in Whiskey Flats Forest, speeding along a narrow track of sand.

Tally unwound a long white nylon muffler from her neck and it fluttered behind us like a pennant. "You want dramatics, I'll give you dramatics," she said buoyantly. I hadn't seen her this carefree in a long time.

Now she pulled off her helmet and her long platinum hair whipped out like another banner. "Unmask and behold," she cried. "Mac the Wife!"

A pile of rocks loomed ahead and I thought we'd crash but a quick turn took us through a low opening.

We sped through a long tunnel into a huge chamber. Both were lit by their own inner fires. "Something in the beam...merges with the rock...makes it luminous," Tally shouted.

She slowed down in the big chamber. The roar of the machine echoed and reechoed.

We headed for a small cave-within-a-cave. I caught snatches of what Tally was saying: "...my brother...my lab...old talc mine...experiments...broke through...explored...Lost Cave of the Adirondacks...wait till you see..."

At home that night I asked Tally: "Aside from carrying on your twin brother's work, why was riding that machine such a fixation with you?"

"Half brother, not twin," Tally said. He was the engineering professor who'd invented the machine at U North and then disappeared into the midwest.

Tally went to the fainting couch. She patted a space for me to join her. "Without getting complicated or metaphysical," she said, "riding that machine gave me an unbelievable sense of freedom from tension. My blood pressure went way down — I measured. I began to feel better as soon as I got into that white jump suit."

"That's a pretty good reason," I said.

She nodded. "But the best one is simply that I never have a migraine when I ride that machine."

"That's great," I said. "Just great." After a moment I asked: "Did you see Busky attach the tunneling device to your snowmobile?"

"No. I found it one night at the workshop; he obviously knew where that was. There was also a note from the aliens, or whoever they are."

"A note? What did it say?"

"Something like 'A gift to Earth from Friends.' I don't recall exactly."

"And you tunneled out caves with it? Did you come across anorthosite?"

"I did some experimenting. I didn't find anything. It's all rather hazy in my mind."

There was something else I wanted to know. "Why did you risk being recognized when you snatched me back there? Surely everybody now knows who the Snowmobile Rider is."

"I didn't exactly think everything through," she said. "But making all that racket I was afraid it would be easy to trace and capture me. If the law was going to get me, I wanted to be with you."

Tally put her head on my shoulder. She sighed and went on: "There was another reason. Having lost the muffler anyway, it was a kind of noisy exultation. I'd won my husband back from Pirt."

"But you never lost me to Pirt," I said.

"I suppose not, but you see the unhealthy effect he had on me. Maybe it was only a symbolic victory. Anyway —" she stuck her chin up and shook out her long hair "— it felt good."

"That's terrific," I said. "I suppose you'll keep on riding the machine then — out of uniform."

"It's a lot cheaper than what I take for the migraine," she said. "And it's probably less dangerous than the drug. You're not going to ask me to stop riding, are you?"

"No, no."

Tally laughed. "Eccentric Housewife, Unmasked as Phantom, Still Rides by Night? I wouldn't do that to you, Mac."

I had to admit I felt relieved.

"I'll still ride the machine, without the costume — and in

a respectable, ladylike way," Tally said. "With a six-pack of beer behind the seat. That's the way, isn't it?" She yawned.

"Time for bed. You must be worn out."

Tally looked at me speculatively, then nodded. "Bed, yes. But I have something to tell you first. I've put off talking about it long enough."

"What's that, hon?"

"Maybe it will explain why I took those potshots at Pirt there at the spaceship."

"I thought you were just speeding him on his way, but if it was more than that it's understandable," I said. "You were in disguise — the epic masked rider. He'd killed your fawn. Vengeance is sweet, even if symbolic. Besides, you didn't kill him, or even hurt him."

"You're sweet, dear, but it's not that simple. I never told you about the night you were off at the broadcasters convention."

"Something about Pirt?"

"We were both lonely, I guess, me with you gone and Pirt so far away from any kind of real folks. I was in bed and Pirt came into the room and crept in with me. He said something in that little-boy voice of his and snuggled down under the covers."

Tally held him in her arms. He was cold and she warmed him. It made her feel warm herself.

She felt motherly and life-giving when he reached for her breast. It was cozy and basic there under the covers and it seemed perfectly natural for him to nuzzle and then suck. We'd had no children and this was a part of life she had missed — a baby nursing at her breast.

"It was a very special sensation," Tally said. "Quite different from when your mouth is there, dear. Sexy, of course, but mother-infant sexy is a way to describe it. For a moment or two it felt so natural, and probably I just would have gently disengaged him. But then —"

Not only was his mouth at her nipple and hand at her breast. She became aware that this was not a little boy in bed with her; it was a small but mature man.

Shocked, she didn't move for a moment. Then she rolled out of the far side of the bed. She ran to the bathroom door, closed and locked it. "You'd better be out of there when I open the door," she yelled, and he was.

Tally had tried to tell me half a dozen times. "I just couldn't," she said now. "The time wasn't right, or the words weren't, or *he* was there." Of course there was also my reaction to be considered. I'd have to live with Pirt, knowing how he'd acted toward my wife, for the rest of the summer, or send him back immediately.

So Tally said nothing and thereafter there was a wary truce between them.

Finally I asked: "There at the spaceship, were you trying to kill him?"

Tally said nothing.

"You don't have to answer," I said.

She was silent a moment longer. Then she said: "I know I don't." Another pause. "Then I won't."

Probably the alien-in-chief — was it he who objected to

being called a Benign Visitor? — wanted to apologize to anyone his people had inconvenienced or hurt during the aliens' stay on or near Earth. He was showing good public relations in scheduling a meeting with us; his people might want to come back some day. Good manners, anyway.

I'll call him A., for alien, because he didn't tell us his name. He may not have one. I also call him *he*, for simplicity. He could be either sex, or any.

He invited Bernie O'Neill, whose broadcasts he must have heard; Busky Kimp as a representative of the Awaiters who got to ride neither a comet nor a Golden Spaceship, and me, author of the supposedly confidential account of how Pirt spent his summer vacation. He told us he had also invited Prof and the Snowmobile Rider but they had declined.

The fact that he didn't arrange to have Pirt present showed good taste, I felt. Pirt was well out of it. He was aboard the aliens' mother ship, parked invisibly in half-space, where no Earthman (me, for instance) could get at him. Half-space sounds like something a typewriter does, but that's what A. called it.

Bernie, Busky and I met in my private office at the radio station and the alien joined us by showing up on my television screen and then stepping out of it, expanding hologrammatically and occupying a chair. Or it seemed that he did these things. With A's permission Bernie switched on his tape recorder and the session, not quite a news conference, got under way.

A. was dressed like a normal Earthstyle businessman — conventional suit, shirt, tie, etcetera. As good a disguise as any, I suppose. He spoke unaccented English.

Practically the first words A. said to us bore out Prof's theory of why the aliens came: "Our being here is more accident than plan. To be candid at the risk of hurting your feelings, our original visit to your planet was a detour in a general exploration trip. Anorthosite brought us. It's rare not only in your solar system but throughout the galaxy. We knew it existed somewhere but had only theoretical data until our scanners identified anorthosite on your planet and its moon."

"If it hadn't been for anorthosite you wouldn't have stopped?" Bernie asked.

"We'd not have known anorthosite was here except that we received a human signal," A. said.

"You mean from the Awaiters," Busky Kimp said.

"No. I speak of a time thousands of years earlier. The signal was that of the young primitive Pirt. It sparked a special symbol in our sentence scanner."

The string of sibilants surprised us. Obviously Bernie had a reaction similar to mine because he asked: "You scan for sentence?"

"Eternally."

"You scanned for sentence and got Pirt?"

"We signal for sentence wherever we go in the universe. We've even triggered for troglodytes. But mostly on this mission we monitored for minerals. Until we have to in response to the signal from Pirt we had not been close enough to Earth to detect anorthosite."

"What kind was it?"

"It was an involuntary signal," A. went on. "Our scanner registered manifestations of an emerging mind."

"You got this signal from Pirt when?" Bernie asked. "During the Long Noon? Earlier?"

"Much, much earlier," A. said. "Eons earlier. Your scientists know that anorthosite has little value in itself. Its real worth is an an indicator, and it indicates the presence of something much rarer — rare here and everywhere in the universe. Anorthosite indicated to us the presence of nordium."

"Nordium?" Bernie asked.

"We took a sample for analysis and tested it later. Nordium is not one of the architectural underpinnings of the universe but it's a highly effective catalyst."

"A catalyst?" Bernie was using a reporter's trick — slowing a speaker down so his information could be assimilated in manageable chunks, or to get more detail.

"Yes. Your sun's components require an infusion of nordium to recharge its nuclear core," A. said. "Otherwise, as is well known, your sun will cool and die in five million years."

"That's *billion*," Bernie said. "Maybe even a hundred billion. Not million."

"Billion-schmillion," A. said with an Earthstyle shrug. "Your time isn't everybody's. Five or a hundred, million-billion, it's all relative. You couldn't handle the job yourselves so it was up to us to do a little preventive maintenance on Old Sol."

"And that's what was happening during the Long Noon," I said.

"Precisely."

"It wasn't one of your ships refueling by drawing on the sun's energy for its solar batteries?"

"On the contrary," A. said patiently. "What in fact caused the illusion of the sun remaining at zenith long into the night was a laboratory ship of ours extracting nordium from the Earth and transmitting its essence to the sun, counteracting its entropy..."

"Just a second, please," Bernie flipped to side two of the cassette in his recorder. I was taping everything on the station's equipment but Bernie wanted his own actuality for the newsroom. "Counteracting the sun's entropy?" he asked, six seconds later.

"Our entropologist found that nordium was able to reverse the slowdown and at the same time facilitate storage of reserve energy. Thus it became theoretically possible to transfer excess solar energy from your Sol to other suns in the galaxy. And who can say how far this might extend? Perhaps even to the suns of other galaxies."

I thought of those underground pillars of anorthosite and their Stonehenge-like capstone. I didn't ask but I wondered if it might even extend to replacing energy sucked into black holes —

Busky put the question for me. "That means now we don't have to worry about red giants, white dwarfs and black holes," he said. I figured he was showing off.

"I suppose you could say that now you don't have to be

blue about the event horizon," A. told him, smiling for the first time. "Not in your time frame, anyway."

Bernie said: "Could we go back to where you said you were signaling for sentence? That's intriguing. What about all the other stuff Earth's put up over the years, hoping we'd be seen or heard? The Arcicibo message. That diagram with the fertile naked couple. All that music and the children's hellos. That spaceborne wampum belt decorated with symbols any genius could understand. Even, maybe, the Great Wall of those inscrutable Chinese."

"We get signals, all kinds, from all over," A. said. "Ordinarily your messages would have taken their turn among sapient salaams from here to the happening horizon."

"Didn't you hear the Awaiters?"

"We deliberately did not. Our instruments filter out messages of a worshipping nature."

Busky asked: "Do messages of that kind — let's call them prayers — reach another destination?"

"No comment."

Bernie brought him back to Pirt. "But you did respond when Pirt called you, involuntarily, way back then. Why?"

"Sibilants. Something subliminal."

There was that hissing alliteration again! The alien was frowning as if he hadn't meant it to be heard. His own sibilants seemed to hint at a fault in the alien armor.

Bernie pressed on: "You mean an appeal by an innocent child of the planet attracted you?"

"It was not the words or the speaker but the speech pattern itself that drew our attention," the alien said. "We were struck by the primitive way he expressed himself, uttering the first meaningful words spoken by a creature of your planet."

"So our own Summer Resident is the original talking caveman?"

A. looked embarrassed; he said: "Actually Pirt was scooped up along with our first sample of anorthosite, if I may describe the acquisition in nontechnical terms."

"Unharmful?" Bernie asked.

"Entirely. We were unable to return him immediately. In the interval we took the opportunity to study the primitive fellow. And he in turn, as time went on, was able to learn much as he studied us."

"How much time went on?" Bernie asked.

A. gave an Earthstyle shrug.

Bernie persisted: "How long was the interval?"

A. said: "It is difficult to express the passage of time, which is a relative phenomenon at best, in terms that would have meaning to three different cultures — yours, ours and that of a creature from an emergent environment. Pirt's time sense, for example, was highly undeveloped." A.'s air of embarrassment clung to him as he continued: "Such were the exigencies of our mission that we redeposited Pirt in a later but approximately equivalent time segment."

A.'s pause gave his statement the significance of a confession.

"He's too far north for me," Busky muttered.

"What?" Bernie said distractedly.

"An old expression. It means somebody's too cunning,



too canny."

Bernie grinned: "That might have applied to you once or twice, eh, Busky? Wait a minute — whatever a minute is in tri-cultural terms! Something's beginning to dawn on me." He asked A.:

"Are you telling us that from your point of view it made no difference whether you took Pirt back to his cave on the shore of that great inland sea — that millennia-girt, long-gone sea — or dropped him off at some cave-like tenement in Spanish Harlem a few years ago? Of course they're only our years. Obviously they don't matter a great deal in your vast scheme of things. Nor does one lost little guy named Pirt. Pirt the forgotten man."

Bernie's speech almost had me feeling sorry for Pirt, the Don Juan of the Dawn.

A.'s hologram began to fade. "I must confess we misplaced Pirt for a while," he said. "For quite a while, by his standards. But he still survives — alone of all his people, unfortunately. But we will make amends, manifold, because the chapter is the book." A. was fading fast. "The clod is a continent. The clone is the clan entire. One man is all men."

He was gone. My television set switched itself off, taking A. with it.

Evidently Bernie thought the scene deserved a more dramatic finish. A curtain line, at least.

"Thank you, John Donne," he said and clicked off the tape recorder.

(Hello, hello, hello. It's me, Omniscient Observer, and if you're counting you will say it is my third appearance before you: Fourth, if you caught my bit part in the Long Noon of Mitchell MacSwan. I felt naked there without my parentheses. But who's counting, except you who live in a linear way? Actually I last came before you in the guise of A., alien spokesperson, in the transcript of a news conference I both participated in and later edited. Did you recognize me? I was somewhat subdued there, in my first public appearance. The report by MacSwan or O'Neill will have shown that. But inside these identifying double parentheses I'm comfortable. I can be myself again. If you ask why I mention punctuation in this oral-aural medium where my voice distinguishes me from MacSwan I will tell you there is also a written version of these proceedings, for insurance.

(And both versions, as I indicated above, or earlier, have been edited by me. Oh, it's all right to change things. Sometimes such revision is required to bring order to MacSwan's untidy discourse. Therefore a swift deletion here, a deft emendation there, a bit of augmentation, and we have a much more manageable work. Don't you agree? Although I need no precedent you will recall that Mac himself admitted early in his tale that he falsified the geography and the geology — and who knows what else?

(You observe that I address you mostly in the present tense. We historians refer to it as the historical present; it's a

device to transfer past or future events into the *now* and make them good for all time, so to speak.

((From my point of view it's like a play, a drama. No matter when a playgoer comes in, the time is now. The events on stage happen in the present and go on happening now. If the audience person returns for another performance, what otherwise is the past — a scene seen, to make myself clear — is still in the present. Furthermore a scene in the last act, seen previously and presumably past, lies in the future.

((I make this explanation to help you understand what I am going to say about the Awaiters — will say — am saying. You need not feel sorry for these pilgrims because they failed to rendezvous with Panacea. To be sure, it's a pity they mistook our laboratory ship for their spaceliner and Pirt's Fourth of July rocket for their shuttle. But they need not despair. Spaceships are like trolley cars — another will be along any minute. Well, not *any* minute. As I have explained, there is more than one theory about the duration of a minute; thy time is not my time. Still, or lo, there is time enow for all in the peculiar circularity of the cosmos. The patience of the Awaiters is to be rewarded, and they are patient; that quality is implicit in the name they chose for themselves. One day they will reach their promised land. In my time frame they reached it long ago.

((I'll set another scene for you. It needs a different kind of explanation. I have to explain why MacSwan, who heretofore has spoken to you in the first person, is shortly to appear in the third. Oh, I know Faulkner and Hemingway and others have switched points of view, but we're not dealing here with American lit. What concerns us is why MacSwan is unable to dictate the final segment of his story as he did all previous.

((The explanation has to do with the fact that the universe is expanding, as some astronomers say, or it's contracting, as others tell us. If it's expanding, time is moving from past to future — from left to right, so to speak — and you're comfortable with it that way. But if the universe is contracting, as others declare, time is moving the opposite way — from the future to the past, from right to left. Actually, there are two universes and both theories are correct. Beyond that is the way I, the Omniscient Observer, travel, which is backward or forward in time, at will. This makes it possible for me to look at all things from all points of view and to realize that time is full of wrinkles and paradoxes, as well as blind alleys and dead ends. I've advised you to hang loose among these tautologies but obviously you and I, the city man and the farmer, MacSwan and Prof, possibly even the pig, have different views of time. This perhaps is also true of modern Earthman, aliens and even cavemen — especially our friend Pirt. For Hamlet, time was out of joint. Do you see? History is what we make it, and from my special vantage point I now tidy up MacSwan's awkward account, which he himself is incapable of ending. Listen.

((I the Omniscient Observer, in my role as A. the Alien, was both eyewitness and catalyst when the expanding and



contracting universes met. These cosmic twins coalesced at the time of the Long Noon, then continued on their opposite ways. And there, because the merging was one of time and not space, no physical damage occurred. But there were significant other changes. My ability to look forward and backward simultaneously, fortified by that awesome coupling, most wonderfully juxtaposed my essence with that of the callipygian Snowmobile Rider. I became MacSwan, hatched to the temptatious Tally. I am MacSwan, and have hustled the former owner of this body off to half-space —

((BREAK BREAK BREAK THIS IS E.E.E. OVER-RIDING O.O.

((Coruscating cosmoses, is he mad? There have been times when O.O. needed reminding that omniscient does not mean omnipotent, but never before or hence has he tried to insert himself so boldly into the story, much less into the affections of a female of an entirely different species, eliminating her mate along the way! No, omniscience does not license concupiscence. Earlier portions of O.O.'s account contain inaccuracies which I have permitted because they are inconsequential. I explain that it is my duty as E.E.E., Editor for Ephemeral Eclectica and thus O.O.'s superior, to verify his copy before it is forwarded. Indeed O.O. is far from supreme; he is in fact one of our minor functionaries. Just as on most worlds, everybody's got a boss. This account of O.O.'s, based largely on MacSwan's tapes, is one of many examples of ephemera we've had from the planet under observation. We call them ephemera eclectica, the category from which I take my title.

((Many details are preserved for socio-cultural interest, rather than for historical importance. Therefore it does not matter historically, for instance, whether MacSwan and his wife kept their marriage together after her confession that she was in bed with Pirt. That made Mac madder than he let on, I tell you, but the significant fact is that Tally and Mac provided a base of operations for Pirt while he did what he had to do. Pirt, as a senior conservation specialist with special delegated powers, kept an eye on Earth's sun, which nourishes the one frail but inhabited planet on which all these characters have been disporting, and contributed to a decision on whether and when to replenish that obsolescent orb. *That's* what matters and maybe Pirt should be well thanked.

((To give another example, it is not important except to Tally and Mac that she no longer has migraine; what matters is that she has lost her memory of certain events, as have other Earthpeople. We freely cured her ailment; although it might be considered a trade-off, but she is unaware that any deal has been made. Mac's memory has grown hazy too, as we have heard, but he still has Tally. Again no bargain was struck; we are a generous and compassionate people, whoever we are.

((Does it matter who we are? Are we aliens? Or are we from the far future of Earth — sometimes called Terrestrialia? Or did Earthpeople in a future time emigrate and

become aliens? And did they — do they — continue to take a benevolent interest in Mother Earth, the Homeland, past, present, future, in its many incarnations? Or is it that we — if we are they — need what Earth's got, anorthosite-become-nordium? And that we use it to fortify Old Sol, who wastes his rays on several of his planets when he could be shedding his grace elsewhere?

((Is it not apt that the nutrient for Earth's sun came not from outside the system but from one of his own planets?

((And was not Busky Kimp correct in principle when he spoke of the ravens feeding Elijah and comets feeding the sun?

((And is it not fitting that transplanted Terrestrials have transformed Earth's sun into a relay station to transmit its surplus energy to that other sun in a similar solar system at the far end of the galaxy?

((These are the important things, which must take place first. Then other matters are permitted to come out well; those would include such boons as eliminating migraine and resetting that gospel group, Busky Kimp and the Awaiters.

((Who do I address here and why do I run on so? I can see why O.O. was so enwrapped in his assignment. It must be the fascination of knowing that what one says becomes part of a record that will be — has been, is being — preserved for all people for all time. Such knowledge is a powerful stimulant to one's communication centers. So I can condone O.O.'s verbal excesses and forgive him for having taken the usual scholarly liberties with minor data. I can understand his tampering with time when time failed to flex properly for the characters in his narrative; we don't often have three-way intersects among people from past, present and penultimate eras. I can appreciate that such a confluence went to O.O.'s head, affecting his judgment.

((BUT — in addition to the previously mentioned derelictions by O.O. there was his unprofessional sin of omission. MacSwan made one last recording in which he asked a number of questions. I do not quarrel with O.O.'s failure to answer them — but there is no way to excuse my subordinate's failure to include the tape in this archive. I do not intend to answer MacSwan's questions in the petty detail he would like, but they are entitled to the space I will give them here. He asked the questions long ago by his reckoning — nearly a year — and it is clear that he has already forgotten them. Nevertheless it should be known that in the fullness and goodness of time — for time is kind, usually — they will have been answered to the satisfaction of the asker, or of those who come after him.

((It's time for me to put my imprimatur on this already too unwieldy piece of ephemera from a long-ago world on whose inhabitants a recharged sun continues to shine. I now rewind to restore O.O.'s unprofessional out-take of Mac's Last Tape, as the Four Questions have come to be known around the shop, and to Mac's and Tally's final scene. Yes, of course they remain together, at least in this chronology, and that will please my superior when I send up the finished work. She likes a happy ending.



((But I'll not recapitulate what already exists. Unlike O.O., I, E.E.E., prefer to let the story tell itself. Listen:)))

This is MacSwan. I want to get these things on tape before I forget them. Some things are fading already, as if *they* were influencing me. I say *they*, sounding paranoid, hinting manipulation by nameless villains. Maybe I am nuts but I'm determined to recap these events before they vanish from my memory and everybody else's.

Here's the list. These things are not figments of my imagination. They happened. And the unidentified aliens, nameless as they choose to be, are to blame, directly or indirectly.

One. Time stopped for 14 hours as the sun stood still in the sky. We're supposed to believe the aliens were recharging our sun, out of the goodness of their hearts, using something called nardium. Or were they extracting rare components from our sun and our earth and fusing them into something still more scarce and valuable? Maybe we need to know what makes nardium so important to them. Then we'll know what we can do with it.

The aliens, through Busky Kimp, gave the Snowmobile Rider a wondrous tunneling tool. Or were the passages bored in wartime as geologists prospected for oil or thermal energy or scarce minerals and chemicals? It doesn't seem possible that the Snowmobile Rider alone could have carved anything so commodious as those storage chambers. Storage of what? Was it nardium? Was it something more than nardium? The main ingredient of a weapon? A cure for all ills?

What is the treasure beneath our dear strange northern land? Surely it's infinitely more valuable than anything our quaint money-digger friend Busky Kimp could imagine. Nardium-schmordium! What are the aliens *really* taking from us?

I knew more about those caves once. I was in them with Tally, in her lab, and I described it all on tape. I've rewound to there but that part of the tape has been wiped. By whom? How? *Why*?

Two. Pirt reverted to primeval savagery and killed the fawn Tally was nursing back to health. That's what they want us to believe; to say, "Golly, our own hunters shoot cows by mistake, don't they?" Yeah? Surely in the vastness of the time that Pirt was in their control they programmed him to do exactly, not approximately, what they wanted. Why they should bring this grief on Tally I can't imagine. Maybe they didn't. Maybe it shows they can't completely control others — Pirt or any of us. It would be useful to know if there are such limits to their power.

Three. Pirt tried to rape my wife. Am I to overlook this as a boyish impulse? Oh sure, even infant males have erections, and they would have me believe the incident was no more than that. But I need a better explanation. Maybe Pirt's previous romantic adventures, the one with the circus midget, failed to start a child and the aliens got him to try again with Tally. Why? To leave an alien-dominated

creature on Earth when they took Pirt away, or in case something happened to him? Will there be a successor to Pirt?

Four. The Snowmobile Rider — shouldn't I remember who that was? — fired at Pirt as he was taking off in a spaceship camouflaged as a water tower. The spaceship attained escape velocity and lofted Pirt to a rendezvous with the aliens. But the story we are left with is that an abandoned wooden water tower was struck by lightning and burned to the ground. Even my station's news broadcasts reported it that way. Never have I known such complete self-censorship by the media, including our own crusading Bernie O'Neill.

There is no way to explain all of this except through alien intervention. Surely the aliens have powers that enable them to reorder our lives and thoughts to accommodate their plans and schemes, to exploit our weakness, to overcome our own will...

What am I saying? What was I thinking? I had important things in mind when I came here to my office to make this recording before going with Tally to the bus station to meet our new Summer Resident. Ah, well, it's all right...I'll ask Tally. She'll remember.

Mitch and Tally MacSwan were driving to the bus terminal to meet the new group of kids from the city. One of them would be theirs until Labor Day.

As they took the rise and drove along the hill that led to town Tally said: "What a shame that water tower is gone."

Mac had to think hard to remember the old-fashioned wooden tower. "It burned, didn't it."

"I think so. How long ago? I can't recall."

"Neither can I. There was something about it. Didn't you have special name for it?"

"No, you did," Tally told him. "You called it the nineteenth century spaceship."

"Why did I do that?"

"Because of its shape and because it was made of wood. It stood on end, pointing to the heavens. There, you can just make out the remains of its base. You said it looked like a big Fourth of July rocket."

"I did?" Mac said. "I barely remember."

He had slowed to look at the charred stumps, just visible in the weeds at the far side of the gully. There on the hill the highway was a two-lane no-passing zone and a car behind them honked.

They drove on. After a bit Tally said: "I wonder what kind of young one we'll have this time? Last summer was so pleasant. Quiet, but nice."

"I forget his name," Mac said. "The new one, I mean."

"Her name," Tally said. "A little girl. She's called Prit. A nickname. When I asked for more information they said Prit is short for Pretty because her real name is Polly. A dark beauty, to judge by her picture."

"Prit," MacSwan said. "Well, I hope we can show her an interesting summer." □

UNIVERSE ON THE TURN

by Ian Watson

We parted softly, with a kiss. Jacques' face looked flushed in the misty, rosy light. Did I detect a hint of embarrassed excitement, a youthful coyness still, after so many visits? No, he was a young God! As he strode towards his woman, I could only helplessly admire the firm swing of his legs, the cleft apple of his buttocks, and the strong trapezius of his muscles massaging his shoulder-blades in a river of sinew that narrowed suddenly to hold high a jaunty head. He was an athlete of a swimmer, poised for the perfect plunge into the stream of woman's flesh.

His woman reclined enormously in her soft half-ovoid of a divan: three metres deep, twenty metres long. Her great parted rump-cheeks were as high as Jacques himself. The flipper protuberances of her one-time legs waggled gently on either side as she scented him. She could not close those stumps around him, of course, yet ancient nerve and muscle memories seemed to be still urging her to try.

Upon the brink of the divan Jacques turned, and grinned impishly. Oh, he knew that I would be admiring him! At a distance the purse of his lips looked harsher: his mouth a mauve, almost maroon gash. Yet the soft bud of his penis had shrunk to a tiny ivory knob — just as if, with so much blood engorging the erect musculature of the rest of his frame, none could be spared for his phallus and even the rosy light was drained away from there, eating a white moth-hole.

Oh yes, he was stiff: his whole body wore a velvet bloom. Oddly, his woman seemed to wish to see him tonight. Squashed in the blank slab of her face, her little eyes squinted down the mountainous uplands of her thorax towards the fleecy hilltop of her tall mons. Of course she lost sight of him as soon as he stepped down from the lip of the divan.

Impulsively I hastened after him, to watch. As I arrived, he was still balanced on the fat triangular wedge of her perineum, the 'diving platform' bulging outward through the archway of her larger lips. Her founts of Bartholin were releasing oily vapours, coating him with a lubricating veil and fogging her regrown hymen: that silk tissue curtain which hid the way within.

Abruptly Jacques launched himself through that damask, cleaving it into streamers. With a graceful twist of his hips he squirmed through the vestibule, between the lesser lips. His shanks flexed against the walls. His heels administered the final push.

And he was gone. Inside.

As the woman's uplands quivered with the motions of his body within her, a low resonant moan rose from the lips of her mouth; and this noise was taken up by women in the neighbouring divans as though their numb vocal chords had become tuning forks in sympathy.

A soft solitary cooing sound was usual — but not this hint of mutual lamentation. Which was curious; and which made my head buzz.

Choosing my own woman at random — two divan-pits further round the hall — I too climbed down on to her perineum, descending hastily below her line of sight since I noticed that she also was trying to squint at me.

As I stood there momentarily on the fatty ledge, her spray smelled less musky, more acrid than usual; it even stung my eyes a little. Half closing my eyes, I dived forward, rending the veil, and hauled and kicked my way within her. As I butted through the soft squeeze of her muscles, up the elastic canal, my excitement mounted deliriously. For now I was laved by lymph, experiencing a quickening ecstasy as my whole body was massaged to joy from the glans of my head right down the shaft of my trunk.

Up into that darkness I thrust myself, up to the great infolding bud of her womb entrance. My fingers tore fruit blindly from her *arbor vitae*. My teeth bit upon it.

And yet...I was gritting my teeth, too. I felt as though my whole body had already climaxed once in her, and now I was trying to force pleasure upon myself a second time. I was having to think about this, and compel it, instead of simply surrendering to the flow of feeling. It was as if my frame had already detumesced.

Yet at last my fists thrust through into her cervix. As her plug-bud burst open, her rich inner ichthors drenched my head and breast and loins, and all my tense erect expectancy was finally fulfilled — in that moment outside of time when the orgasm of the whole organism sets time itself aside...

My woman also climaxed in her own way, in that 'no-instant.' Very soon her muscles were squeezing me back and down again, to pop out on to the fatty triangle from which I had first dived.

She squeezed me hard, though. She almost...*hurt* me.

And although, thus expelled, I glowed with fresh vitality, somehow I also felt seared and corroded. The first, reborn breath that I gasped should have tasted sweet; instead it smelled rank. The air in the divan pit seemed subtly poisonous.

A hand gripped mine. Jacques helped me to climb out.

He read the expression on my face. "You too?" he whispered. "It seemed fine, inside — but then afterwards..."

I nodded, unwilling to speak. The strange air pervaded the whole hall: not a dizzying musk alone, but musk laced with acid gas.

Those leg flippers wagged at us almost mockingly as we walked away to collect our clothes.

We returned from the great basalt block of the harem, that night, Jacques and I, puzzled and hurt by the strange repulsion we had both felt in that palace of love.

To be sure, the women had accepted us as always, becalmed there in the dim rosy light like so many beached whales — massive, mysterious, truncated beings dazing us with their scent attractors; yet there had been that bitter, tetchy undertang...

True, we had swum into their womb-ducts deliciously enough, and been reborn; yet afterwards we had felt aborted, sloughed off like dead womb linings, soiled and cheated...

Once, would you believe it, man could only enter woman's body a very little way? Man had specialised his sexuality into one tiny flute. His whole body could not act as an organ. No grand chorales of all-body love could be played.

Was this the way it had tasted long ago: this dissatisfying, partial union of which Jacques and I had now experienced a hint?

Once, man had ejected little homunculi of himself towards a tiny womb-entry. The sheer delicious act of bursting through into the very womb was unknown. (A violent act to us males, perhaps — one of force and rupture! — yet to those comatose giantesses, our women, how gentle; so that they cooed with sweet delight. Invariably they cooed...until tonight.)

What a strange world it must have been before the Change! Man and woman were the same size then; the female as mobile and fleet as any male.

We still possess, as one of the ur-documents of our culture, fragments from the *Case Notes of Ephraim Johnson M.D.*, first man to witness and assess the Change. I thought a lot about that ancient man as Jacques and I walked home that night, our fingers interlaced comfortingly. Could we be the witnesses, I wondered, of some equally epochal Second Change? Hating this idea, I rejected it. Yet the suspicion still nagged at me. I felt as though I had been hurled back to that time tens of thousands of years ago, when man and woman needed to wrestle together frantically to achieve a mere fraction of our own rejuvenating, polymorphous plunge; back to that time when the numbers of the population soared abominably in pursuit of this fleeting fraction of pleasure, until nature itself took a hand, or else humanity would surely have suffocated itself and the whole world.

Yet was it really nature, or was it man, that took a hand?

Ephraim Johnson's *Case Notes* are of two minds on this matter. Written in the earliest purdah days, the *Case Notes* place the responsibility for the Change now at the door of those chemicals with which the world's water supplies were liberally saturated for a number of years: chemicals favouring the success of Y-chromosome sperm, for male offspring — and next at the door of sheer stress due to population pressure which at the very same time was producing hormonal changes in woman so that for every fifty males conceived, only one female would be.

Perhaps the latter explanation is nearer the truth. Perhaps it was really a case of man thinking along the same lines as nature — inventively mimicking what nature was already doing of its own accord; for without any further dosage by chemicals from that day to this the same ratio of 50:1 has persisted.

But of course the Change involved far more than a mere shift in the balance of the sexes. Did it not bring us our present longevity, by physical rebirth in the body of woman? For which, I need hardly add, the body of woman was obliged to grow big enough for a grown man to re-enter her, entire.

No, a far more profound alteration had occurred than could be accounted for by any intervention by those early pharmacologists. Though at first it was not noticed. For the ratio-shift led inevitably to the start of the purdah phase of culture; since where women are rare, they must be guarded, and all their former 'rights' of mobility or activity are as nothing, then. Which ensured that the *real* Change could take place easily within harem walls, and even pass unremarked for several generations.

Certain documents are so epochal that they become part of our very thought processes, transcending the demise of old languages, and passing over into the new speech. So it is with Ephraim Johnson's *Notes*, the vivid memoir he wrote some years after his lost and reputedly rather turgid treatise, *On the Health of Women in harems*. His fragmentary words, imprinted on us as children via the datanet, cling to our hearts.

To capsule them from memory:

...a special study of the indolent, recumbent existence that all women were now living, was long overdue...I must confess that at first I was mainly concerned with the risks of varicosity, obesity and thrombosis. I had no reason to suspect the true state induced by harem life: the alteration in the human female form away from a mobile, petite configuration towards an ovoid, recumbent form together with a general enlargement in bodily size...

I was able to measure the slow but sure progression away from the male archetype: away from those ratios of distance between foot, solar plexus, head and upraised hand as extolled ever since Classical Times, and explained by modern mathematics as the Fibonacci Series.

This had not been noted earlier because progressive enlargement of the torso-thorax region coincided with decrease in leg and arm length, as ambulation and



manipulation became increasingly irrelevant to harem females.

Statistically, though, the mass of the female body was the increase. Women were growing steadily larger as their limbs diminished, their physiology tending towards a soft, fruity, pearl-like state — which males continued to find deeply gratifying without perceiving the real extent or nature of the change; for visiting males were dazzled by the increased output of pheromonal scent attractors, and deceived by the discreet lighting of the harems (something initially intended to help tranquillise the 'exiles within').

I saw that humanity was dividing into two distinct, sexually symbiotic species: the one, small, mobile and active; the other vast, flaccid, passive...

But it might be years before most men noticed that they were riding their partners ever higher off the couch, enmeshed in an increasing mass of flesh. Many men indeed remarked on the delicious aroma of the harems, yet there was always an element of amnesia about their reminiscences. Besides, with strict social-reward criteria being applied for entry to the harems, long gaps occurred between individual visits...

Of course, that wasn't all. Ephraim Johnson had no idea how large the women would become within mere centuries; nor of the vastly extended life-span which this would bring to man. Thus his words thrill us, but amuse us too.

So I was brooding about Johnson, that man of the interface between *then* and *now*, as much as I was trying to avoid thinking about that air of change in the harem, while I escorted my lovely Jacques home to our pod, to lie in one another's arms, reborn. Though for the first time in memory we had been reborn astringently...

Our city spread out its aerial diadem of curving spokeways, which dangled living-pods beneath like raindrops on branches. It was the diadem of a splash, to be exact, with the point of impact in the earth being the central harem block — from which all arcing veins radiated, bending through the sky in fan tracery vaulting down to their final tips hanging within a mere twenty metres of the ground. Our elastic, sprung city of overwhelming beauty, delicacy and quake resilience.

Far below the spoke we walked along, there purred the starfish arms of life-support machinery, clinging to the earth around the harem core, drawing their power from the geothermal spike plunging ten kilometres deep. The city's root thus bore the harem upon it like the ovary of a flower, from which in turn our three hundred and sixty slim, graceful living-zone petals spread out, abloom.

Each pod beyond Inner Zone was a home wherein from two to twenty loving individuals thrived, speculating about the universe in a thousand different ways; while away beyond the barrier of the mountains on the horizon sprouted our giant cybernated telescopes (photon, radio, neutrino, whatever), unseen and unvisited by us personally. All of their gleanings poured into our datanet, making the city itself one great receiving dish. As well as a living flower.

Overhead, the air-blanket held thick warm atmosphere around us, setting the stars a-twinkle far more impishly than ever out at the cyberscopes, in the thin cold beyond the hills.

But we were both still walking through Inner Zone: a calyx of sepals underslung with gaitly pods for gourmets, drugsters, liquorites, musicamors. And we might have stopped by one of these to celebrate our re-birth. Only, a sudden inexplicable scream from one of the drugpods stirred our anxiety anew. So that we only wished to hasten on over the rainbow bridge and reach home.

And as we hurried, below our spoke the pods rocked gently like lanterns, and the spoke itself bobbed up and down a few centimetres. A mild quake was nudging the city's base. But this was nothing. The Earth's crust was simply slackening out as gravity declined — albeit faster, noticeably faster than it should have done.

Naturally, we all connected the increasing decline of gravity with the coming Turn of the Universe. Using daring new equations of his own devising, Jacques had arrived at a startlingly tiny figure for how long it would take the cosmos to collapse in on itself once expansion halted and contraction began. His ideas were still reverberating round scientific circles, establishing him as very much an up-and-coming cosmetician — or 'cosmological theoretician,' to give him his full glory — making my heart throb with pride for my chosen pod partner. Jacques had such a fine mind.

He argued that if the half-time of collapse of any massive star into a singularity is approximately one-thousandth of a second (a reasonable figure), and if the collapse of the entire universe commences everywhere at once, then the half-time of universal collapse must be proportional on a logarithmic scale to that of any lesser stellar body.

He disregarded the speed of light as a constraint on events, since it is the whole space-time matrix which is due to contract. He boldly discarded the gravitational mass of the universe as a prime consideration — and declared that Time itself was the general binding force and root energy of all. It was in Time, proclaimed Jacques, that the 'missing mass' of the universe was tied up: in elapsed, accrued Time.

If the radius of the cosmos at its maximum is estimated at 10^{28} centimetres, then the half-time of collapse ought to be a mere 10^{14} seconds: a puny 33 million years!

So billions of years of leisurely contemplation hardly lie in store for us, once the critical size is reached. The smearing back into Superspace will take place very rapidly indeed. Hence humanity's justifiable obsession with predicting the moment of the Turn. It isn't simply an abstract quest for knowledge. It seems that we are actually elected as direct witnesses of the greatest cosmic event (bar one: the primal fireball, and of course no one can possibly witness that) — and it's one which will arrive sooner than anyone in the olden days expected!

Whilst gravity weakens year by year, and the Earth spirals further from the Sun, the most distant galaxies are visibly starting to slow down in their headlong flight. Their



redshifts lessen perceptibly. Or rather, they began slowing down a long time ago, and the light only reaches us now. But according to the standard models, not long enough ago to bring them anywhere near a standstill yet.

Not so, says Jacques: as gravity grows less for us, so it 'pools' out at the periphery, slowing the far galaxies much more rapidly — and here Jacques' subtlest equations come into play, explaining how an observer on Earth can experience diminishing gravity, even though an observer on the fringes of creation (which would seem, *to him*, to be the center) would see *us* as slowing down due to a tightening of the bonds.

I confess that this concept of relativistic gravity is almost too subtle for me to grasp — but Time, says Jacques, is the key.

Anyway, the question of how soon, and in what manner, the universe will turn is inevitably the life's work of all the specialists in our science city: philosophers, theologians, physicists alike. What else can really be important in these late days, as Earth spirals untimely towards the cold?

To march across the metagalaxies, let alone visit nearby suns in our own galaxy, we cannot; that dream is long gone. For how could we ship even a single woman off our world? As soon hoist a whale into the sky! The acceleration would destroy the great body. Man's earliest space ambitions faltered utterly on the nub of the Change; for woman appears to belong with Planet Earth which wrought this transformation in her — as though the Earth itself lives and thinks and breathes (even while its corsets slacken), and intends to keep its daughters at home.

As for sending men on their own to the stars, well, male love is fine and beautiful: Jacques and I lie in each other's embrace by night, enchanted, trembling with the bliss of polymorphous touch — yet it is woman-love which enables us to live this way. Far from orgasm being the 'little death' it used to be back in the human dawn times, now by being bathed in woman's ichors our cells replicate themselves way past the Hayflick limit; and we rejuvenate. We can live ten thousand years, until we choose to die. And when we do so choose, we simply avoid visiting the harem; death follows peacefully within a year or so. So how could we go to the stars, womanless? And without woman how would we have time to reach the stars?

Thus our longevity is at once our anchor — and the solace which Earth offers us, to allow us to wait and watch for the Turn, enervated over and over again by that other side of our species which has been subconscious, dreamlike, vast and torpid for so many millennia.

Glancing up at the distant Moon, half as far again from Earth as when man first trod its dusty seas, Jacques exclaimed fancifully:

"You might say that the only enduring constant is the mass of woman! Gravity certainly isn't. Just consider: one half of our species is only one-fiftieth by numbers. Yet woman is fifty times larger than a man! What if woman anticipated the slackening of gravity long before man knew of

it through his instruments? What if she intuited that there would be less gravity to weigh her down?"

"Maybe," I quipped, "that 'missing mass' isn't locked up in Time at all — but in our women?" I hoped that humour might soothe him, upset as he was by the inexplicable nastiness in the harem. "Perhaps new matter was created suddenly and multiplicatively in all the women's bodies — to slow down the expansion!"

Unfortunately my joke had the opposite effect: it wound him up still further.

"I'll swear there's a link between *them*, and the cosmos!" he insisted. "*We* think that we do all the observing. But why shouldn't they too observe the cosmos — using vastly different senses from ours, however extended ours are by the cyberscopes? What else can they possibly fill their minds with?"

"Why, with the job of operating much larger bodies!" said I. "Far more thought-space has to be taken up by simple body-monitoring. Their brains remain the same size as ours, so conscious thought is squeezed out. Didn't they give up consciousness for the sake of something more valuable: to rejuvenate us?"

"Yes — by annulling Time! But how do they tap Time? Time is the key. Did they change just to give us a longer lifespan? Or was it to build a body-field of their own, which might discover the truth we're seeking? By another route: a biological one! Are we men perhaps just their slaves: the remaining mobile and 'intelligent' only so that we can service the harem and inflame their bodies every now and then to make more worker ants, and a few more Queenly Watchers? Maybe they sensed the quest long before us — though only an eye-blink ago, in the lifetime of the Universe!"

Ridiculous. I couldn't entertain the notion. Poor Jacques was more disturbed than I'd feared.

My hand fell from his. In mutual silence we walked on above supposedly gay music, which that night sounded plangent, elegiac and funereal to my ears — as though other men had been hurt recently, as well as recharged, by the harem experience. The music, composed from the musicians' brain-waves via a skull-web, betrayed this in a dirge.

From amongst the musicamors below we heard another cry of fear. Immediately the music itself magnified this into a banshee wail.

As I said, Jacques was a junior cosmetician; and I was a senior prammer, in line for being prime prammer: a chief cyberscope programmer. He had experienced around five hundred half-yearly reincarnations in woman since puberty. I, considerably more. Still, we weren't so far apart in terms of city status. Even a junior cosmetician draws on the services of many junior prammers, and can even tap a prime prammer in pursuit of a particularly daring hypothesis. Junior cosmeticians have to be given free rein for flashes of genius, or else the quest would have hardened into dogmatics millennia ago. So we make a good pod-duo, Jac-



ques and I. Things balance out; disputes are flash-in-the-pan affairs — and we were again holding hands by the time we got back to the pod.

Palming the entry panel open, we stepped downstairs to the roomglobe — which was currently a blue bubble in a tropic sea where tall Angel fishes wafted by like the sails of yachts: data memories of a warmer Earth. I had dialled these marine visuals before we left the harem, expecting that on our return we would wish to float in amniotic bliss. But now we felt more like cold cod, with morose hooks of doubt beneath our chins than graceful angels.

So I dialled another scene: of pastureland, with extinct sheep cropping it, and fleecy clouds puffing overhead like bales of steam. A pastoral — with flute music to accompany, being tootled by some unseen shepherd. Jacques dialled a picnic supper for us to eat on the floor, which he softened from the day's logic-hardness, half way to the softness of bed. We had bread, a bottle of wine, lamb and cheese analogues.

The mood still jarred, though.

"Let's eat out under the damned stars, then!" he cried. "They're what's uppermost in our minds."

So the Milky Way glowed all around us in coiling banners of light; and we were happy at last, to be alone in space together, wrapping bread around cold lamb in starlit sandwiches. Our viewpoint was from the memory of some cyber-observatory, long defunct, far out at one of the Trojan points of Jupiter.

Jacques glanced in the direction of Andromeda, and beyond.

"Consider," he said. "The expanding universe slows to a halt. Then it actually *does* halt, briefly. Is that moment 'a moment in time,' if nothing is taking place? Can the cosmos ever become static as a whole, even for a microsecond? Yet how else can it ever begin to rebound? Time must reach zero out at the periphery, relativistically, as gravity grows huge. And here in the center, time speeds up — or rather it grows denser. Life, the sensitive register, knows this subconsciously. The body field can feed on it — hence our rejuvenations!"

"But how can Time be different in different places?" I asked him. "You always said that Time is the binding force because it is simultaneous, everywhere at once."

"That's simple. Time is denser near an effect, than near a cause. Right now the periphery of the universe is becoming the cause: of the future implosion. This is what the body-field of woman soaks up: that huge increase in effective time pouring inwards. She's receiving gradients of density of time. And we can't measure such a thing. All our netting of neutrinos is useless. All the data we've piled up in vain."

"Jacques, *tomorrow*, please! That's tomorrow's work, not tonight's pleasure." I stroked his cheek in the milky starlight.

But he ignored me.

"In a sense woman *does* draw the universe towards her — by soaking up the effect of the changing gradient of Time. As matter ceases to flow outward, so Time streams back into the center. A big enough body-field can sense this instantly, whereas our cyberscopes only tell us ancient history. So how can we men ever know when we reach the Turn? But our women will know the moment. It's been creeping up on us all for thousands of years already, in the shift of time density." He laughed empty. "Woman was chosen to witness the Turn, and we to serve her. All our cyberscopes are useless. We already had our receivers all along."

He gestured madly towards the Greater Magellanic Cloud; or was it towards the harem unseen beyond the pod wall? Brusquely I cancelled the star view, hoping that this might shock Jacques back to his senses. I dialled clear walls so that he might see our true and beautiful city, and held him tight.

In my arms he still ranted.

"If only we could read their thoughts, then we would know the Answer! They don't sense the passage of time, as we do. They respond to its density — and they pass on the effects to us men, in the form of renewed life. Density, yes, density! That's it! That's why woman's static way of life doesn't offend her. My other equations are all nonsense."

But at last he yielded to me, and to the yielding floor, which I softened still further, to sponge, to eiderdown.

We woke to a quiet quake that was jiggling the city spokes and rocking our pod gently. The weak morning sunlight, sparse juice of a lemon which the hand of gravity did not squeeze quite tightly enough these days, nevertheless cast grey bars of shadow from the eastern arms of the diadem to slant against the harem — bars which seemed, to my keen eyes, to tremble. Or was it that the walls of the harem itself were throbbing?

But even if the epicenter of this quake lay directly down our energy-root into the crust, I wasn't worried; our base and taproot were strong enough to withstand such shocks.

However, the trembling went on and on remorselessly, far beyond the timespan of any normal quake; and instead of keying our pod walls to cosmomathematical equations for the morning's work, we left the pod and climbed up on to the roof-road, curious.

We weren't alone. Other men were hurrying up the spoke ahead of us; and along other spokes to right and left. Crowds buzzed up at the zeniths. Some people pointed; others cried out.

As soon as we joined the group of spectators up on the high point of our own spoke, we could see that the basalt blocks of the harem were rupturing here and there, pushing outwards. Other parts of the walls were crumbling like cheese or cobwebs, as though the constant seismic shock was eroding the very bonds of matter there.



Finally the vibrations ceased, leaving two-thirds of the harem relatively intact, while the other third gaped with holes.

"It doesn't matter," I reassured Jacques. "The robots can cut new blocks. Our women won't die from a little sunlight leaking in."

"Are you blind? Don't you see what's happening?"

No, I hadn't been able to see! Because I couldn't conceive of seeing it. Because my mind erased it. But now suddenly I saw.

Women were emerging from the ruptured harem, on to the broad base-joints of the spokes. Women, in daylight! Vast blank oval slugs, wallowing forward. Enormous sloths moving out on to the separate spokes — and crushing any man who tried to drive them back by waving his arms and screaming into their fathomless incommunicative faces.

As yet, no woman had shuffled out on to our own spoke. But already, up very many others crawled a white, bloated enormity, dislodging pods from their moorings so that they fell and smashed like eggs. Each gay, bouyant bridge withstood, withstood — till the woman reached about half way up to the zenith.

Then, one by one, each spoke abruptly reached its catastrophe point and snapped or buckled to the ground below. Part fell across the starfish base, but the further

reaches churned up the land itself, rock and soil.

Yet however many men died in each collapse, the women themselves seemed hardly affected by the fall. They continued to wallow out along the now-fallen sky-bridges: crumpled roads leading them away from the city in all directions.

Overhead, the air blanket flickered with lightning as its energies surged and faltered; picked up and faltered again — while our own crowd stood bunched together on the crown of a single isolated spike like a rib sticking out of a carcass.

During the night, the universe had turned!

Unashamedly I wept for all the lost alien civilizations which had risen and fallen during the billions of years throughout the youth and middle age of the universe, without ever knowing of this moment; and I wept because they had been able to flower and to fade away in peace without knowing it.

Yet it had not been Man, either, who had marked the Turn. It had been our alien, life-giving, recumbent Queens — who had now moved out from the prison of their contemplations, *towards what rendezvous?*

Our own sky-spoke shuddered as a limbless giantess grovelled out upon it. Jacques and I clung to each other in the crowd, waiting. □

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FIRE KWATZ

by Ronald Anthony Cross

Rock awoke when he wanted — late. He waned on the 3V audio news: "...forty-five people at this famous party, raped and murdered. The sexual freedom group known as the Heavenly Blues is one of the prime —" he switched stations — "Still having trouble? One little blue pill, Good Morning. Always start off the day with a good, good morning."

He waned off. He always liked to be lulled awake by it. He did not take a Good Morning; his head ached, he took Headease.

Then he got dressed and looked out the window. Holiday month, and he had nothing special to do. Some of the people in the streets were in costume; a few were nude. Rock couldn't get used to people walking around town like that; guess he was old-fashioned. Still, he took an interest in two middle-aged couples. What if? — he giggled, the Headease was taking effect.

In the kitchenette he punched out eggos and bham. A few years ago he had tasted red eggs, and he was still having trouble with eggos. He shuddered, he had to keep reminding himself they were vegetable and not unborn...he shuddered again.

For a moment his mind drifted to work. Colors clashed in his mind. He was a color-code expert for the government, and as usual his expertise was being tampered with by the whims of politicians. Blue sector to be changed over to red sector indeed — half the damn city was already painted a garish red. Ever since the latest figures on the correlation between red and compulsive sexuality had been dramatized on the 3V special edition of *Sexo-Psychology Now*, all of the wives of the powerful forces in New L.A. City wanted everything red; red cars, red houses, red dresses; God, it was a nightmare. He glanced somewhat self-consciously about his mini-apartment — red chairs, table, red waterbed, curtains. He sighed, he had the blues. He hummed a sad song as he pulled on a bright red silk short-sleeve shirt and light blue cotton slacks. Then he realized what he was humming.

"Headease — I'm much too wide awake
Been workin' for my fellow man
Until my heart must break,
Oh, please,
Just give me one more, Headease."

Now thoroughly agitated, Rock slammed the plastic ball with the little blue pills rattling around in it into the top drawer of his night table, then slammed the table back into

the wall which swallowed it, wondering to himself how long it would be until those little blue babies became little red babies.

But he resolved to forget about color coding for a while. Like almost everyone working for the city, he had the month of May off. The schools were closed, the cops were on half time, criminals were on overtime, bars and nightclubs were an all-night affair.

An entire month off, the weather was enough to make an adolescent out of his grandfather (who had died last year), and naked people were in the streets celebrating; still, he couldn't just walk right out the door just like that: once a color-coder, always a color-coder, he always said.

First, like any ordinary workday, meditation: he sat crosslegged, sinking into the plush plastic scarlet rug. Blues, he thought, might as well choose blues first. Turquoise, he thought — easing into blues — turquoise spread in a wave, burst and spread in ever-widening ripples until it formed a lake within his inner eye, until it covered everything; but it was more toward the green — good — gradually he shifted toward blue. Suddenly he whipped a jagged lightning stroke of lemon yellow across horizontally, an explosion, deep viridian green dots, shivering; now he was off and running, and he lost himself in his own composition, a symphony of color. And when it was over he sat for a while quietly, with eyes open, blissed out.

Although he had been doing color meditations almost every morning for ten years, more or less, it always blissed him out.

Might as well go whole hog, he thought, although he had forgotten what a hog was. He switched on his 3V, altered the wavelength to pick up the color maze channel. There they were, blip, blip, blip; little bursts of color rushed horizontally across the wall, one following the next, but too slow for Rock. Rock was perhaps the fastest in the world at the color maze. This was partly because of his job, but also it was partly due to this ability that he had become eligible for this fine position: he had been the fastest student ever tested at Special Tech. He had, of course, done well on the other required tests — I.Q., spacial ability, the all-important color visualizations and emotion/color correlations; but it was at the color maze he proved himself most gifted. He called them with precision, and he called them



fast. And now, ten years later, and he was only ten years faster and clearer: he felt he had no peers.

Now he increased the frequency of the color blips till they were popping by so fast they were almost blurring, then he jumped in: "Silver, salmon, vermillion, ocher," he spouted off as fast as he could speak. Finally he shut off the set and stretched, feeling good. Now he was ready for the outside world.

He threw a few blows at the fat rubber dummy in the corner on his way out — "Psychedelic freak" — but nothing serious, no physical exercise today — holiday month.

Psychedelic freaks, he said to himself again, maybe he should have popped the dummy a few more; on the other hand he was perfectly aware that his frame of mind was only a result of hearing the news while half awake, then riveting his mind at that point by deliberately draining it of its natural energy — Headease.

The color meditation had helped, but still, the combo tranq-painkiller that had taken the country by storm had its own strong insidious side effects, you paid the price even if you didn't know it. To his astonishment Rock realized that he knew it, he really knew it, and he had never met anyone else who seemed to notice. This thought of his evident superiority, coupled with the effects of the Headease, and perhaps even magnified by the fact that he was suffering subconsciously from a terrible headache but had bullied his conscious mind out of registering it at all, combined and blended into a wonderful holiday glow — consciously, that is.

Swag you, he said to his subconscious, I've got you under lock and key, baby. He tripped suddenly on the curb and fell on one knee — humiliating!

Two teenage boys whose expressions suggested an entire adolescence of masturbating in closets snickered at him.

"What's the matter, pops, too much Headease?"

"Swag you, you psychedelic creeps, why don't you move to Psychedelphia where you belong."

Strangely enough, the two kids moved on without retort, their expressions quite confused.

Part of it, thought Rock, was due to the incoherence of his line of attack — the kids were obviously right-wingers and hated psychos worse than he did. The result, however, was pleasant for Rock, another victory. For a timeless instant he saw his life as a series of violent encounters, victories that he cherished and relished in his mind until all the life went out of them, and defeats — ah, the defeats.

He was thankful for Headease. Just the same, one of these days, he lied to himself, he'd have to go back over that little insight of his and act on it; not now.

Now was holiday month, lovely weather, beautiful little electric cars zipping by, piped-in easy-listening music programming the scene from every streetlamp on every street corner. He was feeling great; all except his knee and head, which were complaining vainly from subconscious depths.

Then he was aware someone was honking at him. He tun-

ed in on the horn, a harsh buzzer — Kerry, the cop. An expression of distaste crossed Rock's arrogant face briefly. He forced himself to smile, then he turned. Kerry was motioning to him to get in; he did.

"Guess you're pretty excited about tonight. I told Sonja no one could pull it off, but if anyone could it would have to be me. I even surprised myself."

Rock, watching the brightly colored little cars spin by, was hardly hearing anything Kerry the crude undercover cop was saying. A pity his fiancée Sonja had such gross friends, he was thinking to himself, and other thoughts along those lines, when it dawned on him: me, Kerry, Sonja, tonight.

"Wait a minute, Kerry, I don't know what Sonja told you, but she must have forgot, we already had plans for tonight, it would be rude of us to break them this late. Maybe some other time."

His plans were to sock her some peppo pills and take her to some nightspot where the music was too loud to talk much, mix some booze with the pills, then get her home and in bed quick. If he bothered to think about it he really didn't much like her. He liked to be seen with her, however, and he was sure this affection was mutual.

"Sorry, pal, I don't think you understand. I busted my ass to get these passes. I pretended it was police work and you guys were mercenaries." (Nowadays there was so much crime the cops sometimes employed mercenaries on short-term contracts.)

"Besides," he continued with a smug expression, "Sonja'd murder you if you said no to this one, Rocko, she'd positively murder you. Anyhow, I thought you were into color. I thought this one was for you."

Hardly, Rock thought; if you thought that, you sure don't know Sonja. "What one?" he asked.

"Jesus, she really didn't tell you — Colorama. You've heard of Colorama, Rock, even you must have heard about that."

At first he couldn't remember, some popular club, some far-out — then he had it.

"My God, we are talking about Psychedelphia, about going inside of Psychedelphia where all those gangs of hippie mutants fornicate in the streets, where those death cults hide out that sneak over and break into our section..." he trailed off.

Kerry was smiling at him cruelly. "Yellow, you're more afraid than the girls. Of course it's dangerous, that's what makes it a great coup."

Coup was the latest status symbol. "Let me tell you about a great coup:" then you told them about some daring interesting event, and finally showed them some object taken from the area, preferably at the moment of truth.

"Great coup or not, it's no deal, Kerry, not going, uh-uh, not for Sonja, not for anything."

Kerry shrugged. "Big deal, I'm sure I can dig up someone who'll jump at the chance. Forget it, Rocko old buddy, where can I drop ya?"



But 9:00 o'clock that night, speeding along in that same little red bug, he and Sonja were packed into the back seat.

"I can't wait to get over the line, isn't that it up ahead?"

Both the girls were euphoric with the illicit promise of tonight's events; Kerry was smug; but Rock was viewing it all with mixed emotions.

Mostly he wanted out; but on the other hand, he knew that later, safe home in bed, the electric thrill of tonight's danger would add to the sex. Sonja would be wanton. Lascivious thoughts made him bold: "That's it, Sonja." He draped his arm around her and cupped his hand and slid it under her tunic onto her breast; she hissed. Elaine twisted around to see what was happening. "My God, Kerry, Rock's going to swag her right in the back seat while we're crossing the line." Kerry laughed. A forty-year-old adolescent laugh.

Then they were stopped, and Kerry said something brief and jovial to the guard, and they were over the line, driving slower now.

"It's getting back you'll need the passes, nobody cares who goes in, but wait till we try to get back. Now remember what I told you, just act natural and nobody'll know you." (They were dressed like psychos.) These people aren't dangerous really, well, they're just wild, and I guess...well, yeah, they're dangerous. But just act natural, us undercover cops do it all the time."

"Succinct advice," Rock couldn't resist.

But: "Thanks." Kerry seemed unoffended.

The place didn't seem so different, the buildings were older, the people in the streets moved in a looser gliding gait, and yet — Rock felt an irrepressible thrill — color was everywhere. It was too dark to see it, but Rock could sense it on the sides of buildings, in the loose silky clothes, burning bright inside these old hotel rooms, waiting for him under cover of the mysterious night.

They parked on a dark street.

"Half the streetlights don't work, and the others only half work," Elaine said.

"They set 'em that way on purpose," Kerry added, "to swag up the cops."

Rock shook his head mockingly to Sonja, who glanced nervously from Rock to Kerry and then back again.

"Remember just act stretched out and no one'll know the difference, the way we're dressed." They all wore loose flashy silks.

"Swagging cops," someone shouted at them immediately from a group of kids across the street.

"Ignore 'em," Kerry said.

"Sage advice," Rock added.

"Thanks and swag you," Kerry shot back to Rock.

I'll be damned, he's catching on, Rock thought.

"That's it, Sonja, isn't that it?" Elaine was pointing up the street.

My God, Rock thought, my God in heaven, color shall be thy name.

Colorama was all the immense sign said, and yet the sign said more. Flashes and swirls of cerise stabbing into a pool of chartreuse, and all the little violets and magentas were there. Color, color everywhere, and not a drop to think — the sign said all this and much more.

But it only said this to Rock, the color expert for the city.

"That's positively the most gaudy neon sign I've ever encountered in my career of neon sign spotting," Sonja said. Glib and chic, Rock thought, that's the problem, too glib, too chic, both of us.

It was early, 10:00 o'clock or so; still, the place was jumping, and if Rock and his party stared at everybody in the place, everybody stared back.

"It's the clothes," Rock suddenly realized. "They wear bright colors like these, but they don't pay any attention, they just throw them on. We've been too careful. Even with these colors, these outfits we're wearing look like uniforms." Prison uniforms, he thought to himself, curiously.

Kerry shrugged, unconcerned, tough guys don't care.

Then it was as though Rock was quite suddenly absorbed into the place. My God, it's magnificent, he thought; it's crazy but it's magnificent. It's the same as the clothes, loose, uncontrolled, natural as a bird's song.

Indeed, it was filled with birdsong. The only music, which came from hidden speakers all over the walls, ceilings and tables, seemed to be incredibly loud birdsongs and magnified sounds of insects, mingled with occasional pings and clangs of some unknown percussion instrument.

And color everywhere. Lights, colored lights — random flashes of violet, scarlet and lime, mixed with intermittent pitch dark. Rock was dissolving in color, unpredictable wild color.

It was the same as the clothes. Back home they had color, he should know, he planned it. He loved it, plenty of it, but it was all neat, orderly; it had meaning, it didn't just explode and explode at you.

A waitress moved across the room toward them in a strangely meaningful jagged pattern, flashing on and off in the dark and light.

"Mescalinos, four of 'em, chick," Kerry said to her. Then somewhat anxiously as she zigzagged off after their drinks: "Remember to drop your pill in the drink, it neutralizes the mesc."

"What about the upper, don't mescalinos have an upper mixed in?" Elaine asked him, then broke into laughter when he answered, "Well, it won't hurt to have some fun — except maybe Rock. Does it hurt, Rock?"

"We shouldn't have come," Rock said one last time, but it was a fading feeling he was trying hard to cling to but losing fast. Then all at once he let go.

"I love it," he said suddenly. "I love all this color. I love the sounds, I love the waitress."

All at once everyone at the table was quiet — stunned?

The waitress swam back with their drinks. Her bare



breasts were luscious fruit splashed with light. As she handed Rock his drink she touched her lips with her tongue and regarded him suggestively through half-lidded eyes. It was true that he affected most women that way and always had. It was another of his gifts he had long ago taken for granted and never questioned, along with his speed at the color maze.

Slender and strong, elegant of movement and alert of expression, he accented these features with the flourish of lofty disdain: an irresistible combination to the women he preyed upon.

Absently he glanced from waitress to Sonja and back again. He raised his drink.

"Don't forget the pill, for Christ sake," Kerry whispered in a hoarse nervous voice.

"Tell you what, Kerry, you take mine. You can use two. Imagine what a little insight might do to you in your line of work: wreck you."

He tossed his pill into Kerry's glass and took a good slug out of his own, set it down and smiled at the three people staring at him in astonishment. But he was smiling scared. My God, what am I doing, he said to himself in disguised terror. You've been bullying me around too much lately, his subconscious answered, but he couldn't hear it.

"My God," Sonja said, what are you doing?"

He shrugged to her and secretly to himself; whatever it was he was doing, it was half done. He raised the glass, took a deep draw on it, and sat back to wait for effects — beneficial or, more probably, otherwise.

Everyone suddenly seemed drained of chatter; at least he had accomplished that much. Rock felt a sudden elation: he had sensed instinctively that whatever the drug did to him, it would at least act as a barrier between him, and Sonja and her friends — perhaps permanently. He hoped it would be a chasm. Yes, it was true, he hoped it would be permanent. Had he never known that he felt that way? It was so obvious, always had been so obvious, was this the drug?

"Do you feel anything yet?"

Rock shook his head.

"The effects should be very fast in liquid form like that, no capsules to dissolve. The thing is, just don't get scared. Have confidence that everything's going to be okay": this was Kerry.

"Swag you," Rock said calmly.

"God damn it, he's high already. Son of a bitch."

"Rock dear, don't get upset. Please just keep calm." Sonja was almost crying, still her veneer of sophistication made her somehow self-conscious about her gestures and speech, even now: she just couldn't let go.

If she cries, Rock thought, the half of her that's watching will empathize with the half that's crying. Why, I do believe she's fallen in love with herself.

Do I do that? I do, I really do, how ridiculous we all are. He began to laugh out loud, a loose rippling sensation that sent thrills vibrating through his abdomen; suddenly he felt queasy.

"The speed'll keep him from getting queasy, at least we don't have to worry about that," Kerry said.

This sent Rock into another wave of giddy rippling laughter, then queasy again, and even more queasy. He was going to throw up.

He could imagine what that would be like, after the laughter he had just experienced. For some reason this sent him into another incredible burst of laughter followed by another queasy spell. And suddenly he noticed a new phase taking place. The bursts of colored light were no longer just one color at a time; each color contained a rainbow, and the rainbow remained quivering after the color had faded and a new color flashed on. Each color was all color. And the birdcalls were no longer separate from the flashes of colored light, oh no, no, they were creating it. They were creating each other. Everything was creating everything else. My God, everything was bursting together into one enormous interacting explosion of movement, meaning — meaning what? He almost had it, captured it, made a religion out of it and lived happily ever after, but not quite: not quite is all you get.

Then he lost track of everything and everyone. He seemed to be swimming in color and noise, which to him were not separate.

From there he glided smoothly into a series of swiftly changing forever forgotten worlds of incredible dimensions and planes, and somehow each evoking an inexplicable intensity of emotion, each stronger than the last.

When he came down from the first wave, and recognized again the cafe, Sonja, Elaine, Kerry, all he could say to himself was, oh no, please not higher and higher, I can't stand it higher, no one can stand it, I've got to concentrate, concentrate, concentrate.

He followed the word "concentrate," and the word stretched out, exploded into color, and he was swept up into the second wild wave, mounting higher, always higher.

Evil beings, trolls, guffawed and rollicked in the blazing puffs of light. One coughed smoke, grotesque face distorted, another laughed, raucous as a jackass braying. One ogre in a sleeveless tunic had enormous ugly arms bulging with gross muscle. Rock knew them, had known them all his life. They were the trolls and he the prince. Their grossness was the reason for his elegance, their awkwardness was creating his speed and clarity at the color maze. The leader with the enormous arms was leering his brutish ogre leer at Rock. Their two gazes locked. And in that moment Rock understood the blessing of the adversary. It seemed to him that the two of them were locked together in eternal combat: brothers, beloved enemies.

And yet Rock was the prince, he thumbed his nose at the buffoon. And was swept off in another wave. He could barely hear Kerry's voice, apologizing, bargaining.

"He's just too slammed out, sport. You know, like zong. I'm sorry, sport. Come on, sport, he doesn't know what the hell he's..."

Light — there was so much more light than ever before.



He couldn't focus any of his thoughts, all of his little mental identity tags were drifting away from him all ways at once.

He spilled off into pools of color light sound

Kwatz

Swimming. How long swimming? What swimming what in? Why color and color and...he almost had it. The lights had been turned off. The club was in complete dark, except of course for the light of mind. Except of course for that! He laughed hysterically, a high bubbling lilt.

"Sssh, quiet, Rock, don't be afraid, just freeze it. They've turned off the lights, they're going to have an entertainment, a psychedelic dancing girl, or something incredibly gauche like that."

"Gauche." He said the word out loud; it was like a puddle of pea soup, murky bubbling slush.

"Please, Sonja, please no more French, some soft sweet Italian, a little sharp clean Spanish, even some farting German, but merciful mother, no sly slushy French."

"Oh, Kerry, my God, what am I going to do?"

Then he could hear her weeping, a nasal but slick whine.

"You're weeping in French, you even weep in French. In the name of decency, Sonja, I beg you to weep in some other language."

He suppressed another wild desire to laugh. Something was going on here. The dark, the incredible dark. Why had he never thought of it before? It was cool and delicious. It was romantically forboding. It could be either stark and empty, or filled with lurking thought forms. It could be just plain dark, or if you wanted to, it could be splashed with blazing lights and colors from your very own mind.

"Everyone should sit in the dark," he confided, "it provides such wonderful entertainment."

But this revelation apparently provided no comfort for the ailing Sonja. He could hear another outburst of muffled self-conscious weeping.

"Smother your tears in your pillow," he suggested lamely, forgetting for the moment they were not at home.

Then quite suddenly — for Rock it was the most sudden thing that had ever happened in the world — a flurry of clear wild tones, sharply struck bells, dazzled and confused him, hung in the air like a streak of jagged glass, vibrating itself to pieces, and the pieces to more pieces — and let there be light.

The figure of a young gypsy girl uncoiled in the cone of light, shivering as if she were a leftover tone from one of the bells. Then she began to glide and writhe. Naked and smooth, she gestured with the whole of her quivering slender form, to the chattering of a new mass of bells. Rock's consciousness poured down the funnel of light and spilled on her ripe belly and jiggled with her creamy swaying breasts. He was captured with the circling gesture of her supple wrist and thrown free with the sudden breathtaking skyward toss of that cloud of hair.

Naked, and very pale, her body shaved clean of hair, her lips and pubes were painted scarlet, and she wore a red rose

in her coal black hair.

She danced, as supple girls becoming full have always danced. She circled and circled, bringing herself to you again and again and again. See, here I am and here, and here are these breasts, these lovely feet, here for you, but not really quite for you.

She danced as dancing girls have always danced, in ancient Egypt, in Babylon, in Turkey, in San Francisco and Los Angeles, in New Los Angeles, and here in Psychodelphia.

And yet for Rock, other things were happening. So many other things he couldn't sort them out. Color, he thought, and yet he had always indulged in color at the expense of form. Now for the first time he experienced the fulfillment of form in movement, and the color was made exquisite by the blending of the three into the one element called dance: the white flesh splashed in shadow and moving against the black background under the dark cloud of hair, the two brilliant splashes of scarlet and the third rusty red of rose in her hair; how subtle yet strong, that stroke.

Then the tempo increased, circle, circle, circle; she seemed, to Rock, to be showing him something over and over that he couldn't quite grasp. And yet she was patient with him and tender, circle, circle, circle; see, here I am again and again, for you, for you.

Then in an astounding burst of clarity he understood it once and for all, for ever and ever, there and then, in that eternity of now.

As she moved in that cafe, archetypal woman moved in his mind to unite with man; all the figures of our deep subconscious past, Dumutzi and Inana, Ishtar and Adonis, Isis and Osiris, Rama and Sita, merged into one coupling blissful creature, mouth to mouth, belly to belly.

He understood the dance; he could not put it into words or even thoughts, it was at once too subtle and yet too strong for that. He could only move with it, be conscious of it — the dance was all.

Light applause — the girl was gone. Rock sat stunned, barely aware that the bursts of colored light had come back on. People were talking, life was going on and on.

"If that's psychedelic, I'll stick to Headease!" — giggle — "Honest, what a corn-pone dance, a little gypsy psychedelick Carmen, you'd think after eroding your mind like that for the umpteenth time, you'd come up with something original!" — that was Elaine.

"I wonder if she was slammed on drugs. She didn't even look to me like she meant it. I had the feeling she was camping it."

"She meant it," Rock said solemnly. "Everyone means everything. No, don't laugh, it's true, everyone means everything even though they may not be aware of it."

"My God, Rock, I thought Freud went out of style. Come off of it, you weren't cut out to be a sociopsych."

"But Freud was right, Freud was a hundred percent right, everything we say, everything we do, we really mean it



and everything is sex, or rather, sex is everything. My God, why are we so glib? Freud was an incredible genius." Rock was astounded by this obvious historical fact which had long since gone out of style, and so had to be rediscovered. "And Jung," he almost shouted, but he calmed himself again. "Jung and Freud weren't leaders of opposing schools, they were working together on the same work of art, they were one."

He realized with a start that he was embarrassing everybody at the table, terribly, that he had been from the beginning.

This realization gave him a strange sense of power. What if I screamed and screamed: He pictured their anguish and embarrassment; he wondered, what is to stop me from screaming and screaming? Suddenly he was terror-struck. He buried his face in his arms, moaning. Nothing to stop any of us from anything. My God, it's all a charade, it's like we're all levitating, pretending we won't fall down, but we all fall down, we all fall into...

Kwatz.

He became aware someone was wrestling with him. He had been pounding his head on the table, that was it. They were struggling to keep him from it; he ceased. Now, still with his head in his hands, he felt a gradual growing awareness that seemed to start in the pit of his stomach and seep out. He was in an elegant slender body, in a nightclub called Colorama, on earth in a solar system, in some galaxy or other in this or that universe. He sat up, he smiled, he felt fine, nothing mattered and everything mattered — same thing. He stretched — everyone was looking at him, distrustful glances — "I'm fine, I'm okay now, really."

Then he noticed it on the table, red but not gleaming, deep soft beauty, alive; at first he thought it was a vision. "The rose?"

"For you, my sweet, you irresistible devil. My God, he's so slammed he didn't even notice the whole point of the sordid little affair. Don't laugh, Kerry, it's too serious an omission. It was all for you, Rock. The gypsy dance, the whole elaborate old-fashioned display. In the end, pure gypsy style, she threw you her rose. My God, it's true, he didn't even notice. I thought that's what we were talking about all this time."

But Rock was no longer paying attention. The dancing girl had come out of her dressing room, completely clothed — well, almost completely clothed — and with the air of a somewhat limited celebrity, swiveled her way between tables, smiling here, waving there, toward Rock. No, it was not toward Rock, it was to the table of trolls next door she aimed her luscious self. Briefly she smiled and tossed a wave to Rock, then sat down at her friends' table. The hulking brute draped his bulging arm around her shoulder and glared at Rock: self-consciously she thrust it off.

"My God, she belongs to that psychedelic gorilla Rock was making faces at, let's get out of here before she stirs

something up. Enough is enough."

"That's true," Kerry confided directly to Rock. "It's all I could do to keep him from beating the shit out of you, Rock. I could probably handle him if I had to" — he leered romantically at Elaine and winked — "but what the hell. Always avoid a fight if you can; but if you can't, cut loose with everything you've got."

"Sage advice," Rock said quite seriously. "That's very good, Kerry."

But Kerry, scowling, obviously didn't know whether or not to be insulted. "Well, hell, anyhow, shall we?"

"Shall we what?" Rock asked.

"Leave? Shoot? Rocket off? Shall we make like the trees and leave, Rock?"

Rock picked up the rose and waved it at the dancing girl; as he had suspected, she was instantly aware of his movement. (Of course she really meant it).

Rock took a deep breath; it was like plunging into an icy pool, he knew the cool relief that would follow the shock.

"I tell you what, you guys make like the trees and leave, I have something I have to do. But good news, you won't have to worry about me any longer. Sonja, I bequeath you all my Headache. You may need it, but whatever else you do, please stay away from me for the rest of your life. Same goes for you two, okay?"

Sonja was elegantly weeping again. "Oh dear God, why do I put up with all this?"

"Attend, man, I don't care if you're slammed out or not, just freeze it for a change. We've all had enough glitch out of you. Now just clam up and get up and we'll head back and sober you up."

But Rock could sense beneath Kerry's anger and frustration a glimmer of hope — could he get rid of Rock?

"Listen Kerry, I'm not slammed anymore. I'm dead serious. Just leave, and forget about me. I'm not coming with you, period. I won't fight if I can get out of it, but if you force me I'll cut loose with everything I've got."

Kerry could not deny the wisdom of this. He rose and got the ladies moving, and with a stream of token complaints from Sonja, they left.

Rock raised his hand with the rose in it. To no one in particular he said: "I've picked up the rose."

Then he got up and walked over to their table. "May I sit down?" He ignored their refusals and, smiling directly to his dancing girl, sat down.

"I don't know where to begin. Let me put it simply as possible. I've picked up the rose. Let's avoid the long, complicated series of opening gestures. Trust in me. Let's go home and make love, right now. Surely you can see it's inevitable, why must we wait? Why bother with the game at all? Come on, let's go."

He stood up and took hold of her wrist in a light but strong grip; he was still smiling.

How lovely she was, with her stunned expression, as though for the first time awakened from a dream, but not yet sure of the nature of the reality she had awakened to.



At first it was confusing to Rock why he swiveled backwards, arms waving, swimming in the flashing light, tripped, stumbled, and fell. His cheekbone throbbled on and off, at first a dull sensation, but swiftly growing stronger and clearer — pain: he had been struck a blow.

He bounced up off the floor lightly, almost as quickly as he had fallen to it; always quick and agile, the drug seemed to increase these abilities rather than decrease them.

The huge troll was clambering out of his chair, pushing aside the table. Was it possible he had exercised all that force from a seated position? Of course not, he had reared up and swung, knocked himself back down in his chair again — clumsy brute.

Not so big as he had seemed; but on the other hand, a whole lot of muscle moving fast. Rock tried to dance around like he had seen some fighters do.

"Freeze out, man," he got out, before the next blow caught him. Bobbing and dancing around, he tried to duck it, and it caught him on top of the head, making him momentarily dizzy.

And yet it was the brute who backed away, set his stance, and now began to advance in a slower, more methodical manner.

He's hurt his hand, Rock realized; in fact he's probably broken it. The crazy bastard just slammed me on top of the head with all his might, he's got to have wrecked his right hand: you just can't wade in swinging like that if you're not wearing gloves.

Rock backed away from him, talking to him in a low voice, "Listen man, freeze out — stretch. You've got a broken hand there but I'll let you off. Let's both just..."

This time the attack came in the form of a ballet-like set of high senseless kicks.

Thank God for the popularity of karate training, Rock thought, as he effortlessly avoided this off-balanced form of attack, which mainly served as a drain of the kicker's energy, giving Rock a slight breather.

Now or never, Rock thought; he danced in and launched a left-right combination fast and light. It was the sort of thing he practiced on his dummy every day for exercise-therapy, and he considered himself quite a master of it. Only in this case the dummy was moving, and the left struck only a glancing blow, while the right missed by a mile.

This time it was Rock who backed away wincing, holding his left hand.

My God, I'm lucky I didn't hit him with that hard right. This is really dangerous. Every time you land a blow you wreck your poor hand, it must be one of man's most vulnerable areas.

Again the fight resumed, the brute moving carefully forward and Rock just as carefully backwards. The effects of the psychedelic had set him in a strange, even mood of detached awareness: he was intensely interested in this fight, but almost as though he were a spectator.

I never realized street fights were so different from boxing matches where they pad your hands. By God, I believe

they do it to protect your hands and not your face. And karate — unless both of you are kicking, you can't afford to kick at all, because it's too tiring and far too easy to avoid. My God, street fights are so dangerous you can't hardly afford to chance anything.

Now the brute, still moving forward, was breathing hard as a result of three more kicks he had thrown, one of which had landed on Rock's shoulder and would make a small black and blue mark by tomorrow. The brute was wearing shoes and had not broken his toes; but he was fast becoming hopelessly confused. In his karate training the opponent always got down low and came at him so both of them could kick each other. It seemed almost impossible to kick someone who was moving around fast, as you had to stop and stand on one leg, unless you were crazy enough to leap into the air and deliver it from the sky, and even he wasn't that filled with macho. If only they were in a ring with boundaries and a referee to make this squirrel fight, and if only he hadn't wrecked his hand in a fit of rage.

But they weren't in a ring, and the lighting made it even more difficult to connect; and this slender buffoon kept backing away, dodging behind chairs, circling around tables; and yes, he had to admit it, this guy didn't know how to fight, didn't go by the rules, but he was fast and alert, he was a Goddamn natural.

By now Rock had picked up the idea of feinting. Being careful not to accidentally connect and wreck his hands, he nonetheless could toss his hands around in a threatening manner and keep the troll at a distance — and the fool never seemed to quite catch on it was all a fake.

Even so, it seemed to be a stalemate. The two kept aimlessly circling around tables in the flashing colored lights, from time to time the one kicking futilely into the empty air, breathing heavily, or the other throwing light feints to slow him down.

Some of the customers had got up and cleared out. A surprising amount, however, were watching from their tables, and it seemed to Rock inevitable that his opponent would land one of his stronger kicking attacks on an innocent, seated spectator far before he would ever corner Rock.

Now he stopped moving completely, arms hanging down, breathing hard. "Come on, Goddamn it, it takes two of us to fight."

Why, that's true, Rock thought, I haven't been doing my share, and yet I have to go about this carefully or I'll hurt myself. What did Kerry say — "Cut loose with everything you've got"? He felt a surge of elation; why, everything in this place is what I've got. He picked up a saltcellar off a table and took careful aim at close quarters; then he threw it hard.

"Ouch, Jesus Christ, you dirty stretched out zang-eater." The man Rock had been fighting with indignantly moved one hand to his forehead, then reeled, then caught his balance again. In the weird lighting he hadn't been able to see the object Rock had thrown, in order to dodge it. He felt a terrible surge of anguish; this was com-



pletely outside all the rules.

He's not so big after all, Rock realized, it's just the beard, the outfit, the muscles. In fact, he resembled for all the world a scared little tough kid dressed up in a pirate outfit: the clown was even wearing earrings.

Now both of them were aware the tide of the fight had turned, and turned for good.

Almost ritualistically Rock whirled away from him, danced by a table and whipped up two compact glass shakers, salt and pepper. In a flash of blazing orange light he observed them, one light, one dark.

Inspired, he dropped the light and twisted the head of the dark, hard.

Then he spun out of the way of one last futile kicking attack, and almost solemnly, like a bandidero planting the sticks, he darted in and tossed the full contents of the pepper shaker in his opponent's face.

Even in his super-aware state, Rock was not ready for the full impact of the results of his attack.

The man, breathing hard from his senseless kicking, took in enormous draughts from the cloud of pepper, into nose, mouth and wide-open eyes.

Suddenly, explosion: he reeled blindly, coughing, choking and rubbing at his eyes, tripped over a chair and rolled around helplessly, thrashing about like a man having a seizure.

Now is the time for a few kicks, Rock thought happily, when your opponent is helpless to avoid them. But before he could loose his first kick, it became quite apparent to him that the fight was ended.

Now everyone was rushing over.

"My God, we'd better get him to emergency. Don't rub your eyes, stop it, you're making it worse. Damn you little boys, fighting over me, you damn near killed him. Help me get him to my car, I'll have to take him to emergency. Oh God, you too, your jaw's swelled up like a balloon, and both of you look like you broke your hands. Oh God, look at his poor hand."

"He shouldn't hit people on the head with it."

She stared at Rock, strangely perturbed. "Are you for real?" was all she said, but Rock caught the undercurrent of electricity: she loved it; she didn't even know it, but she loved it. It was the culmination of her dance — well, almost.

Later, in her bed, mouth to mouth, locked and writhing in lubricious rhythm, the dance continued and the dance ended.

"Good God, I don't even know what I'm doing half the time, all these psychedelics. Of course I wasn't really his lady ever."

"Of course not," Rock reassured her. Combing her fluffly cloud of black hair, eternity was in her every gesture. I would rather watch this woman comb her hair right here, right now, than do anything else, anywhere else in the world: how can I ever go back from here?

"But you were so fast, how did you ever get so fast? Bronzo's the grand marshal for our revolutionary group.

He's thoroughly trained in all the tradition of the martial arts and all that. I never saw anyone that fast before."

He took her by the hand and led her to her 3V set, dialed in color maze, then upped the speed, then again.

"What are you doing, Rock? Nobody can run mazes that fast."

Smiling, he ran the maze.

A few weeks later he was inducted into the Psychedelic People's Revolutionary Army. He was surprised to find out that a revolution had been going on all the time and he had never even known it. This was due, they told him, to the biased establishment reporting of the news.

He was trained with firearms, and grew a beard, and wore loose green military surplus clothes. But nights he spent sailing the waterbed with Alisha.

And if he truly had no convictions either about the revolutionary army or his old life as a color coder, at least he had no regrets. It was as though he were acting out a scenario which had been prepared for him in advance.

He drew all his real life out of Alisha, a moment here, a moment there: dancing at the nightclub, she sees him and bursts into smile; playing with the little girl next door, she sits her in lap and suddenly both ladies grow pensive; or in bed, changing, changing, changing, wanton, innocent, abandoned and yet careful in her abandonment; it was all women he loved in her.

And so it was, a year later, when he used his fake mercenary police pass to get himself back out of Psychodelphia.

How fantastic his old world appeared to him: masses of mini-cars darting like bugs, everything color coded and orderly, people floating around slammed out on tranquilizers or headache pills, or pep-up pills or booze. Why, no one's sober anywhere, he realized suddenly, it just goes on and on forever.

People stared at him with tranquilized yet fierce gazes: although he had shaved and changed his green outfit, a year had passed and styles had, of course, radically changed. By the time I get back to Psychodelphia I'll have forgotten how to dress there; he almost had to laugh at that.

He picked up the package waiting for him at the post office and proceeded to the hotel room which had been reserved for him.

The clerk leered at him, begrudgingly handing him his key: was he wearing his hair too long or too short?

Upstairs, floating on the hotel air cushion bed, picturing from time to time Alisha with lust, he opened the package and assembled the rifle.

Absentmindedly he punched the coordinates into the gun's computer, the speed of the monorail, the distance, all the essentials: the scope sight adjusted itself.

An indefinable weariness washed over him, somehow adding body to the series of fragmentary pictures flirting with his mind. He could almost touch Alisha. I'll do it for you, he whispered to her, if you believe in it, I'll do it for you.

A few hours later the monorail was rushing by above the



rooftops across the street, but Rock's room was in the top floor.

Peering through the super scope at the windows popping by, all he could make out was the bright flashy colors of people's silk clothes. The President would, of course, be wearing royal purple, even a purple mask: carnival month had rolled around again. The colors flashed by him one after another, so fast, no one could run the maze that fast, no one but Rock.

Red yellow red red green blue purple: he squeezed off the shot. Through the sights he caught a fragmentary glimpse of — what? It was too fast to see, he knew he had a hit, but something was wrong.

The monorail car disappeared in seconds; they probably wouldn't be able to stop it for ten miles. He boxed up the gun, and carrying it with him, caught the elevator down, tipped the surly clerk, and went out into the streets of the city.

"Did you know the President was on that mono that just went by?" the clerk had confided to him; Rock, not trusting the sound of his voice, just shook his head.

Out in the streets, at first he kept expecting to be arrested at any moment, but his confidence grew. Then the music over the loudspeakers suddenly stopped, and the news was announced at all street corners: "President shot, by unknown assailant, critically wounded, rushed to hospital."

He stuffed the box in a streetcorner disposal unit, where it would be rushed along through the tubes and, with luck, burned in the huge central city furnace that supplied heating for the whole city. And to his surprise he even made it back across the border without incident. But something was bothering him, something still not clear in his mind.

"I saw it hit," he told Alisha, "but it was so fast, his head just exploded, only it didn't explode blood and brains, it exploded wires and, Jesus Christ, Alisha, it exploded wires. The President I just assassinated was an android."

Alisha smiled at him, frozen in the act of combing her hair. She was getting ready for the night's dancing at Colorama.

"Of course the President was an android, didn't you know that? Honestly, everyone knows that."

"But for God's sake, Alisha, they'll just stick another android in to take his place: it was all for nothing."

But already the mindless thrill of violence was having its subtle but inexorable effect on him. When he stood up and walked across the room to her there was a new spring to his step.

As she kissed him, she thought with ecstasy: for me he has fought and for me has killed: his power is mine.

But as he kissed her, he was thinking with ecstasy: none of it matters, it's all just noise and change, one big senseless color maze — winner take none. None of it matters, not even her; she may have mattered during that one magic moment of her dance, but since then I've been clinging to that moment, and by God that's what I called freedom.

After she left for work, he took off, wandered around town, got slammed and joined the Heavenly Blues, a group of psychedelic sex and murder freaks; and lived out the remainder of his brief life in a duality of cheap thrills and constant boredom.

While Alisha took a string of other lovers, but found herself unable to keep from forcing them, each one, to run the color maze, and comparing them with her lost, incomparable Rock. □

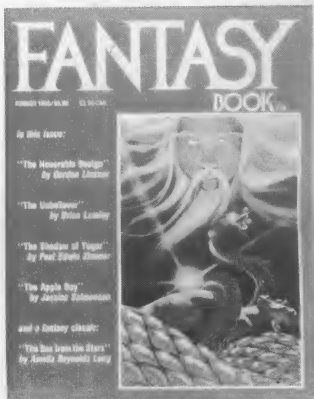
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